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# Richard Wright's Protest Writing: The Expression of Dispossession and Non-Conformism

Serge Lazare Ouédraogo

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Opérée en cotutelle au sein de

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The Expression of Dispossession and Non-Conformism.**

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## **DEDICATION**

*To my late father Benjamin OUÉDRAOGO, my lovely mother Cécile SAWADOGO,  
my beloved spouse Marie Denise OUÉDRAOGO-COMPAORÉ and my dear children  
Maria Christina and Theodoro Christopher.*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am indebted to all the committee members who accepted to proofread my research paper and to sit on this august jury. May the Almighty bless you in your noble task of academic training.

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<sup>1</sup> In the culture of the Mossi ethnic group I come from, this term is used when one is overjoyed and lacks the appropriate words to thank his/her benefactor. It could be translated into English as « Thanks a million ! ».

## **STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

I swear on my honor not having reproduced in my thesis all or part of already existing work(s), except for short or long quotations in the text, enclosed in inverted commas and referenced in the bibliography of my thesis.

Therefore, I claim any resemblance of my arguments or sentences to other authors' is the result of pure coincidence.

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# INTRODUCTION

In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not.

*T.S. Eliot* "East Coker," 1943

As T.S. Eliot bluntly wrote, to reach possession, dispossessed individuals "must go by the way of dispossession" and, indeed, Black Americans had to toil through dispossession to get possession, and conquer ignorance to access knowledge.

Dispossession, to quote the *Black Law Dictionary*, is an "ouster, a wrong that carries with it a motion of possession, an act whereby the wrong-doer gets the actual occupation of the land or hereditament" (Campbell 423). This definition links ownership to land ownership. The *Online Thesaurus* further considers dispossession as "the condition of being deprived of what one once had or ought to have: deprivation, divestiture, loss, privation," [and also] the "expulsion of someone from the possession of land by process of law" (Quoted. by Orabueze 24). Thus, inherent to dispossession is the notion of territory. Dispossession can also be psychological, moral, religious, socio-cultural, economic, intellectual, or political.

In the young American nation, dispossession was legalized with Jim Crow laws, which destructed safety and happiness as the Declaration of Independence itself commanded. Among the various means former slaves and Black Americans utilized to conquer their rights and repossess the basic promises of the Declaration of Independence they had been excluded from, telling and writing about their plight were useful and effective tools. Slave narratives were the very first accounts that revealed the lives of those who had been deprived of everything. Writers such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs showed the importance of writing as an efficient tribune to denounce human dispossession (slavery) and to advocate for former slaves' full integration into the American nation. Following in the footsteps of early slave narrative writers, successive Black American writers adapted this genre to fight against dispossession and for the recognition of their black identity.

In the 1940s, Richard Wright emerged as the most daring writer focusing on dispossession. His blatant, non-conformist protest style challenged the literary tradition. Indeed,

non-conformism consists in challenging social or legal conventions when they are viewed as doing a flagrant disservice to individuals or a social group (Parvez 2018). When non-conformism is used in literature, it leads to refusing to abide by traditional literary standards by writing in a quite genuine way so as to resist literary norms and force revolution. Although non-conformist writing is viewed as marginal literature, it de-territorializes the norm to move from marginalization to recognition. After the Harlem Renaissance, vastly marked by a cultural revival and the use of art for beauty, Richard Wright definitely took a different artistic direction marked by non-conformist protest writing. This literary genre consisted in breaking away from the Harlem Renaissance elitist culture promoted by black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke to uncompromisingly protest against the plight of Blacks in America<sup>2</sup> and their living conditions. In other words, to borrow from Irving Howe, the main idea was to protest against “old lies [...] as no one ever had before” (Howe 354) when it came to depict Black American lives. Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940), and *Black Boy* (1945) exemplified his non-conformist vision and the style he used to protest against human dispossession.

*Uncle Tom’s Children* is a collection of five short stories. “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” much like a prelude to *Black Boy*, depicts the life of a young boy, named Richard, who lives with his family in the racist South. Around the age of twelve, Richard becomes aware of his racial membership and all the discrimination and oppression it implies for him, which compels him to pack his luggage and move north. “Big Boy Leaves Home” portrays a group of four young black boys named Big Boy, Lester, Buck and Bobo who are tortured by southern racism. They play truant and break into a white man’s swimming pool, creating an incident which results in Lester’s, Buck’s and Bobo’s deaths. “Down by the Riverside” is about a black man named Mann who lives in a poor house with his pregnant wife Lulu, his mother and his nephew Bob. They are cornered by a flood in a way that Mann needs a boat to row his wife in labor to the Red Cross hospital. Unable to pay for a boat, they steal Heartfield’s boat, a situation which leads to Mann’s and his wife’s deaths. “Long Black Song” presents a young black couple, Silas and Sarah. Silas works hard to make a living but, one day, when he is away, a white graphophone seller comes to the house and rapes Sarah. Silas takes advantage of his second coming and shoots him dead. By way of reprisals, he is burnt alive by a white mob in his own

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<sup>2</sup> Elitist culture must be understood, here, as the cultural policy of these intellectuals to select and promote the best artists to the detriment of the masses following high intellectual standards. In his essay entitled “Talented Tenth” W.E.B. Du Bois articulated his vision of an elitist culture as he believed the ten black intellectuals could produce high standard works of art and help younger black artists to attain this high-standard cultural production that could compete with white artists to prove Blacks’ intellectual and artistic equality to Whites.

house while Sarah is watching from her hiding place. “Fire and Cloud” and “Bright Morning Star” both show how Christian belief and political activism can be bedfellows. In the first short story, a black Christian pastor named Dan Taylor is torn between siding with communists to march against food dispossession and keeping peace with the white police. Following the police’s failure to convince him to side with them, a white mob picks him up and severely beats him in the bush. This episode definitely rebels him and, upon returning from the bush, he marches with the crowd composed of poor Blacks and Whites. In the second short story, Sue, an Adventist church member, is convinced by her communist son Johnny-Boy to support them. The white police, which are after Johnny-Boy, want to force her to denounce him but she stands up to them. When Johnny-Boy is finally captured and brought to the bush for lynching, Sue joins them with a gun to defend him. He succeeds in shooting Booker, the mole, before the sheriff returns fire, killing Sue and Johnny-Boy.

*Native Son* tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a poor and uneducated twenty-year-old black boy living in Chicago. He lives in a cramped rat-infested house with his mother, his brother and his sister in the South Side, a poor black quarter. Bigger is particularly aware that he has no control over his life and feels Whites represent a looming force threatening to fall on him at any time. At the age of twenty, he is lucky to be called by Mr. Dalton to serve as his daughter Mary’s chauffeur. Because of his awareness of racial separatism, Bigger constantly struggles to stay away from Mary and her communist boyfriend Jan Erlone’s attempts to get him closer to them. One day, upon returning from a night party, Mary is drunk and cannot stand up, obliging Bigger to carry her to her bedroom. As Bigger hugs her against his chest, her physical tenderness arouses his sexual desire in such a way that he cannot help kissing her. Following Mrs. Dalton’s appearance at the doorstep, Bigger stifles her to death out of fear. After his murder, however, Bigger gets ambivalent feelings of pride and further plans to use a ransom note to crook Mary’s parents. He involves his girlfriend Bessie in a risky plan. He will later kill Bessie to prevent her from speaking and denouncing him to the police. He is finally unmasked and sentenced to death, notwithstanding his communist lawyer Max’s outstanding plea.

*Black Boy* is a fictional autobiography which accounts for the life of a young black boy named Richard. He was born in 1908 in Natchez, Mississippi, where racial dispossession was all the rage. His parents, Ella and Mr. Wright, were poor and his father left the household to fiddle with another lover. As Richard grew older, he found himself at odds with his family members and American society as a whole because of his non-conformism to the family code of conduct and the prevailing Jim Crow laws. His daily struggle to come to terms with multi-

faceted dispossession led him to literally de-territorialize himself from the South to the North, only to find that dispossession was present all across the United States.

Wright's three works, that will be analyzed in this work, deserve special critical attention for paramount reasons: while many Black American artists "tried to bridge the cultural gap between blacks and whites [...], Wright moved beyond this to obtain equality between the races" (Labbe 2), and to protest against human dispossession. His stance raised debates around Wright's protagonists, their respective social environments, and the strategies they use to come to terms with conflicts. In 2012, Tommie Shelby offered a rather philosophical reading of Wright's works, especially of *Uncle Tom's Children* where he perceived the protagonists' conflicts with their environment as a result of racial injustice and oppression: "Wright is attempting to sketch a set of values that he believes the oppressed have to live by as they struggle to survive and hope to overcome their oppression" (Shelby 516). His intention in *Uncle Tom's children* is, indeed, "to envision a new society where racism and segregation no longer exist and freedom and justice obtained"<sup>3</sup> (516). Nevertheless, fighting against injustice and for freedom means recovering justice and freedom that have been taken away from the characters. In the perfect society that Wright advocated for, all citizens had to have equal rights. *Uncle Tom's Children*, where the protagonists refuse to conform to legalized social dispossession, was Wright's subtle way of calling for non-conformism. It is clear that fighting against injustice meant fighting against what Black Americans had been dispossessed of. Since the alienation Blacks suffered from and internalized in their lifestyles was legalized by Jim Crow laws, fighting for freedom in Wright's novels can, thus, be regarded as a non-conformist attitude.

In *Black Boy*, the oppressive environment Richard is forced to live in shapes his lifestyle. His childhood in the South is dominated by his family's extreme poverty and lingering Jim Crow laws. The pathetic condition of his unstable childhood, marked by lack of love and warmth in the family, is obvious in Wright's fictionalized autobiography. His literary interest and imaginative nature alienated him from his black community, delving him into an uncomfortable collective-versus-individual situation, which further aggravated his feeling of alienation. For Hemanthakumar, Richard's conflict in *Black Boy* rather originates in racism which has made him a second-class citizen in American society. His early years spent in the

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<sup>3</sup> To obtain freedom and justice in a dispossessing environment, oppressed people must build their own ethics. They can either conform with dignity to unattainable freedom or adopt an attitude conducive to freedom (Shelby 514). By suggesting that Wright set the values and ethics that the oppressed had to adopt in a context of White oppression and that Wright advocated for Blacks to abandon their ethics of fear to adopt his ethics of the oppressed based on resistance (517-518), Shelby half-admits the presence of dispossession and non-conformism in Wright's fiction.

South, where his rights were encroached on by racism, deeply impacted him. Hemanthakumar suggests that “Richard’s status as a dispossessed black makes his situation worse as he was born poor due to the racial plight” (Shelby 52). Although Hemanthakumar’s analysis is stimulating as it unravels the relationship between dispossession and Richard’s difficult living conditions, the protagonist’s behavior is an unconscious response to the deprivation of an *ego* or *super ego* which appears to be a leitmotiv in *Black Boy*<sup>4</sup>. When a character is dispossessed of his desires by the *super ego*, his/her *id* sometimes resists by choosing the path he decided for himself/herself. Once the path is freely chosen, the protagonists can, thus, voice their grievances and express their protests against dispossession, which leads them to the path of non-conformism.

It also must be noted that Wright struggled to give a voice to marginalized and alienated characters like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Theresa Drew Haymon insists that marginalization and alienation, as portrayed by Wright, basically stemmed from racism. As she contends, “Alienation is a factor in Wright’s artistic achievement, but the scope of his subject is reduced to racial alienation” (Haymon 328), which implies that Richard’s conflict with American society entirely turns around racial alienation. Nevertheless, alienation is a form of dispossession against which the protagonist fights to regain a free sense of personal self. For instance, Bigger’s unconventional behavior epitomizes his struggle to recover an identity of his own by challenging social norms. The racial alienation highlighted by Haymon encapsulates various forms of dispossession with which Richard and Bigger unconventionally struggle to come to terms with.

Even though James A. Miller insists that Bigger’s initial silence suggests he is overwhelmed by the white racist authoritative discourse and that “it is within this authoritative discourse, symbolized by [...] the blatantly racist argument of the State’s Attorney that Bigger must struggle to recover his voice” (Miller 503), one cannot deny the fact that if Bigger is

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<sup>4</sup> In Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, the human psyche is composed of three forces which are the *id*, the *ego* and the *super ego*. The *id* works on pleasure and desire principles without regard to any social norms. In other words, it represents the unconscious part of the human psyche. The *ego* is actually the human consciousness which works on acceptable behavior or social conventional principles and is responsible for regulating the *id*’s needs. As for the *super ego*, it is the superstructure of the human psyche. In clearer terms, the *super ego* is the social environment in which the individual lives. This environment is organized by social principles that the *ego* is to abide by. When the *id* falls in pleasure or desire needs, it sends a request to the *ego*. The *ego* examines this request according to what is acceptable or not to the *super ego*. If it is acceptable, it satisfies the *id*’s request. If not, it sends powerful discharges to the *id* to repress its desires. In some cases, the *id* may resist the *ego*’s discharges and act contrary to the norms or conventions. This act is usually referred to as non-conformist and unconscious because it comes out without the *ego*’s (or consciousness) approval. For more details on the functioning of the human psyche, see Freud’s *Philosophy of Life: New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933) and *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1935).

struggling to recover his voice, it is certainly because this voice, which is normally inherent to any human being, has been taken away from him and replaced by the racist authoritative discourse that Miller mentions in his analysis<sup>5</sup>. Actually, one does not recover something that was once lost, which justifies the presence of dispossession in *Native Son*. Moreover, it can be seen that, as Miller remarks, Bigger eventually becomes articulate in the white world of authoritative discourse. Bigger is henceforth “sullen, brooding, brusque, and sometimes violent in his attitude towards his family and his immediate community” (Miller 503), which is considered as a form of non-conformism to Blacks’ collective acceptance of white supremacy with all its corollary of discriminatory social rules. Bigger’s dispossession and his non-conformism stand as a light on the top of a mountain which many critics have not yet perceived, not because they are blind as American society is to Bigger’s subjectivity, but obviously because literary criticism is constantly evolving to bring out new perspectives.

While looking for new perspectives, one can see that through his characters’ portrayal, Wright showed the quest of the dispossessed for possession. Regaining their black identity to reach and achieve recognition in American society was an essential Wrightean quest. In a related vein, Bryant suggests that “the reporter’s reference to Bigger as Mike neatly encapsulates the point that Wright is intent on conveying in *Native Son*, namely that through racism [...], Bigger’s identity has been soundly vaporized” (Bryant 264). Nevertheless, is there anything responsible for the vaporization of black identity in the novel? If so, there would be no gainsaying that vaporization is actually a result of various lacks and deficiencies. In looking closely into *Native Son*, it comes out that Bigger’s entire fight is centered on repossessing his own self in order to gain recognition in American society, an idea which can partly be put in line with Radovan Hovad’s.

Wright’s protagonists do not conform to their respective social environments. Radovan Hovad (2010) contends that non-conformism is closely linked to racism. Focusing on *Black Boy*, Hovad maintains that racism is the sole fact which accounts for Richard’s rebellion. For him, Richard grows in a racist society institutionalized by Jim Crow laws which ironically make white Americans and Black Americans separate but equal. When Richard does not understand the notion of racism and its implications for his community, there is no problem. But ever since

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<sup>5</sup> There are many authoritative voices in competition in *Native Son*. Each one is struggling to dispossess the other of audience. For more on white authoritative voice and Bigger’s subsequent silence, see Hirthler’s “Race and Repression in *Native Son*” (2013), and Miller’s “Bigger Thomas’s Quest for Voice and Audience in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*” (1986).



he has started finding answers to his illuminating questions about the race matter, problems arise as he rebels against the institutionalized racist system. So true Hovad's analysis may be, it appears, however, restrictive to some extent, as he does not seem to consider the complexity of Richard's character which cannot only be elucidated through racial readings. While racial issues cannot be ignored when analyzing *Black Boy*, the three novels cannot be complete without taking into account the different psycho-moral forms of dispossession which surround Bigger as well as the protagonists of the other two novels. The various non-conformist strategies they develop will also be studied.

The negative impact of racism on Richard must be considered, but it is critically rewarding to analyze the various constraints which work on Richard's psyche and allow for seeing beyond historical racism. As Jacques Derrida argues, "[t]here is no single cause behind an event. There are, instead, causes. The reason for the causes is that right from individual to society, everything is fragmented. Explanation, therefore, rests on fragmentation" (Derrida in Mondal 2001). Taking Derrida's argument into account, it becomes clear that Richard's conflicting interpersonal attitude cannot be properly addressed through the lens of racism unless it is assisted by other concepts such as dispossession and marginalization.

Gilles Deleuze suggests that in any human groupings, marginalization is present and builds virtual borders not only between two human identities but also between the members of the same identity. Such a marginalization originates in competition between the different human identities and between members of the same human identity, which leads to positioning one human identity above another or one member of a human identity above another of the same identity (Deleuze in Parker 12). The human identity or the member of the human identity finds itself in the margin as soon as it is in an inferior position. Even though Parker, a critic of Deleuze's ontology, contends that "the margin does not necessarily have to be a space of confrontation between identities [and that] identities may perfectly well impact upon each other by sharing, emulating, replicating, or competing over each other's qualities" (Parker 11), he ends up admitting that "[t]he hostility toward the other humans on grounds of some qualities they are held to possess is rather a particular articulation of the margin" (11). For instance, Richard, the protagonist, lives at the margin of society. As Parker states, hostility is a particular articulation of the margin which always leads the marginalized subject to the path of deprivation. Richard and Bigger exemplify this as they are both dispossessed of their rights to assert their personal identities not only by Whites but also by their own community, namely Aunt Addie, Granny and Buckley. By refusing to conform to this situation, Richard and Bigger

break off the conflict between themselves and their social environments in their attempts to escape fragmentation and to avoid the destruction of their identity.

Drawing on the concept of fragmentation, Eliot Robertson sets out to demonstrate that the very route of Richard's conflict with society can be traced back to fragmentation. Richard never enjoys a coherent life, ranging from his father's flight from home which leaves a fragmented family, his movement from South to North and vice versa, his movement from one place to another in search of an honorable job, which fragments his social stability. His mistreatment by his parents and relatives leads him to a fragmented psychological status, and his migration to France ends up disconnecting him from his whole African American community. As a matter of fact, Wright mirrored his own life and that is the reason why he portrayed Richard as a victim of fragmentation. Robertson substantially holds that "social and psychological fragmentation is the dominant insignia of Richard's life" (Robertson 78). Nevertheless, in Richard's case, fragmentation is the dispossession of his individual wholeness which has been fragmented into many pieces by his social environment. Richard's conflict may, thus, be the result of his conscious or sub-conscious attempts to repossess his wholeness by trying to piece fragments of his life back together so as to reshape a coherent free and whole self<sup>6</sup>.

As it appears, many critics, maybe over-simplistically, account for Wright's protagonists' conflict with society as a result of racism. Yet, Richard Wright's creative works cannot be understood by solely confining them to the racial version of life. Michel Fabre stood against those who restricted Wright's works to mere racial struggle. Though Fabre did not deny racial issues in Wright's works, he warned against any tendency to summarize his works as racial novels. In addressing what could be called "the mysticism, racism-related issues, and controversies on Richard Wright's character" (Fabre in Wideman 411), Fabre completely took a different stand:

I insist upon judging Wright's work as a whole, not separating his writing from ideological framework, and not making a split, only artificially justified by his exile, in

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Quayle also focuses on fragmentation of families and views it as a form of dispossession in the Australian aboriginal context (Quayle 174). Just like Robertson, fragmentation is psychologically analyzed by Quayle, highlighting the ways oppressors carry out assimilationist policies to enforce cultural and psychological dispossession (184). My contention is similar to Quayle's as she focuses her analysis on the psychological harm of dispossession, intergenerational impacts, and community fragmentation (205). As people are made to deny their own identity in the Australian aboriginal context, their situation can be put on a par with Richard's community which is fragmented into scattered pieces in *Black Boy*. Richard is struggling to collect his own fragmented pieces to reshape his identity, through unconventional or non-conformist means, which Robertson did not particularly seek to highlight.

the unfolding of his career. It is only by respecting this unity in its ideological, racial and historical context that Wright's importance can be fairly evaluated. (411)

Fabre's remark arguably challenges many traditional views on Wright, as well as traditional ways of looking at African American literature as a mere matter of race struggle. Indeed, classical critics of Wright's works do not pay specific attention to dispossession and non-conformism as salient issues in the lives of the respective protagonists of *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. They largely see an extension of the post-slavery era conflict between Whites and Blacks, the latter fighting for emancipation and equality in a racist American society. Wright's characterization is generally considered as an indictment of the racist system in America, just as summed up by Ralph Thompson: "Wright's text is a stinging indictment of American attitudes toward the Negro over a period of 300 years" (Thompson in Evans 120). Studies placing dispossessing factors at the heart of the analysis (to account for the protagonists' conflict with the whole society) have not been developed so far. Yet every aspect of their lives seems to be underscored by various forms of dispossession which cannot be overlooked. Dealing with the conflicting lives of Wright's characters without taking this factor into account and without looking at non-conformism as a dominant strategy to confront dispossession constitutes a closed door in today's African American literary criticism.

Deleuze and Guattari consider the novel as "crabgrass, a bewildering multiplicity of stems and roots which can cross at any point to form a variety of possible connections. Reading can participate in these connections; a reader makes connections as he reads [...]. He can discover where passages in the text lead, with what they can be connected" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1983, 14). In other words, the novel is viewed as a house with many doors. Each door is connected with a given meaning in the novel, and the reader is the one who opens one door or another according to what he/she is looking for in the novel. Yet the door opening up to the discovery of dispossession and non-conformism as a fighting weapon in Wright's protest novels *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* has remained a closed one so far and this situation could impede on any deeper and diversified understanding of the whole characterization of Wright's protagonists.

Therefore, this study intends to open a new door by trying to decipher the connection between dispossession and the protagonists' non-conformist actions and interaction with their social environments. In other words, it seeks to discover how the protagonists use non-conformist strategies to counteract their dispossessing environment and to move from dispossession to repossession. In this respect, the investigation of the concepts of dispossession and non-conformism in the three novels will be carried out with the following questions in

mind: What motives hid behind Wright's decision to mirror his real "dispossessed" life in the three novels? What literary vision and tools did Wright use to protest against dispossession? What are the various forms of dispossession Wright projected through the novels? To which extent do dispossessing factors impact the outer and inner lives of the protagonists? How does Wright's language in the novels advocate non-conformism to the principle of dispossession? How does non-conformism allow Wright and his characters to move from dispossession to repossession?

To answer these questions, this study will start by delving into Wright's real-life experience to show that the projection of his own dispossession in the novels of the corpus aimed at raising Black American self-consciousness and protest against oppressive alienation. As it will be shown in the course of the analysis, Wright made use of deconstructionist vision and tools to protest against dispossession. Dispossession manifests itself in every aspect of the protagonists' lives under psycho-social, politico-judicial and socio-economic forms, as it will be demonstrated, without discarding the psychological and socio-cultural impacts. Wright used language as an unconventional weapon to create tension and violence between the protagonists and their dispossessors with the aim of highlighting the danger of dispossession. An attentive examination will evidence that, in the context of dispossession, Wright used his style to question dispossessing social, cultural, economic and political conventions to make his characters move from dispossession to repossession.

The whole analysis will rest upon Jacques Derrida's theorized concept of fragmentation and Gilles Deleuze's concept of the margin and minor literature. Derrida's approach suggests there is no meaning in a work of art because it expresses absence and presence at the same time and only the reader as a supplement can provide it not a fixed meaning but a process of differing meaning. In *Writing and Difference* (1978), Derrida argues:

For in question here [the work of art] is a departure from the world toward a place which is neither a non-place nor another world, neither a utopia nor an alibi, the creation of 'a universe to be added to the universe,' [...]. This universe articulates only that which is in excess of everything, the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language; [...] this excess is the very possibility of writing and of literary inspiration in general. Only pure absence, not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced, can inspire, in other words, can work, and then make one work. The pure book naturally turns toward the eastern edge of this absence which, beyond or within the prodigiousness of all wealth, is its first and proper content. The pure book, the book itself, by virtue of what is most irreplaceable within it, must be the 'book about nothing.' [...] This emptiness as the situation of literature must be acknowledged by the critic as that which constitutes the specificity of his object, as that around which he always speaks. (Derrida 7)

In simpler terms, Derrida suggests that there is no single interpretation of a text as a connected whole. Every literary text is made of a variety of fragments which are independent from the text as a whole, and each fragment embodies a specific meaning or interweaves with another to give a meaning, which presupposes that no literary theory can unravel the full meaning of a literary text. A literary text is a set of fragments which can take various meanings such as psychological, psychoanalytical, philosophical, sociological, political, historical, etc. Roughly speaking, Derrida suggests that no text can be said to convey universal meaning. Meaning is rather a result of the constant process of competing interpretations which supplement the meaning intended by the author of the text, delving the text's meaning into simultaneous presence and absence. In the same vein, Ajda Güney and Kaan Güney opine:

Significantly, 'texts' are not natural reflections of the world in Derrida's viewpoint. Texts build our interpretations of the world. By reading a text each reader can observe a different meaning and understanding. Derrida claims that all these different thoughts of the readers are true and none of them can be denied or called a false interpretation. At certain periods in our lives, the means by which we perceive and assimilate the things around us alter. Because of this fact, the reader is the supplement of the whole text. For Derrida all texts are ambiguous which is to have more than one meaning. (Güney and Güney 222)

As far as Deleuze is concerned, "writing from the margin" revolves around three basic concepts: territorialization, de-territorialization and re-territorialization. While territorialization can be understood as the fact of conquering a territory, whether physical or non-physical, to run it through particular norms and standards, de-territorialization consists in deconstructing or contesting this physical or non-physical territory so as to create within the deconstructed or contested territory a new one with new norms and standards, which is referred to as re-territorialization. De-territorialization and re-territorialization are the essence of marginalized or minor literature which Deleuze and Guattari define as "not the literature of minor language, but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1983, 16). "In the minor literature all matters are political and the question of the individual becomes even more necessary and indispensable" (17). In clearer terms, minor literature is used by minority groups whose works of art have been neglected by the major group in order to gain recognition. Major literature is well territorialized as a connected whole which is supposed to be the standards to be followed, keeping the marginalized or minor literature from having a say in debates on issues addressed in the major literature. However, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, thanks to their constant revolutionary becoming, minority groups can write from the margin to push de-territorialization further and gain more territory:

American literature has got this exceptional power to produce writers who can recount their own memories but like those of a universal people made up of emigrants. Precisely, it is not a people called to dominate the world. They are a minor people, eternally minor, caught up in a revolutionary future [...]. Each becoming brings about the de-territorialization of one term and the re-territorialization of the other; the becoming interlinks and forms relays in a circulation of intensities, pushing the de-territorialization ever further. [These minorities] write, form a rhizome, increase [their] territory by de-territorialization, and extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency<sup>7</sup>. (Deleuze 2013, 14; Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 11)

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that through minor literature, minorities can write from the margin by de-territorializing, through lines of flight, the norms of major literature. By re-territorializing it, “minor” writers bring literature back from the margin to the center and finally gain recognition and become part of the canon. This shows that, instead of being silenced by the territorialization process of major literature, minor literature can rather make itself useful in addressing issues dealt with by major literature. As a matter of fact, “because the collective or major consciousness is sometimes in the process of disintegration, minor literature can produce an active solidarity, in spite of marginalization, to bring about another consciousness and sensibility” (Deleuze, Guattari, 1983, 17). Simply put, minor literature can bring people together and raise their collective awareness on issues of burning importance. Deleuze and Guattari’s theory provides a grid of reading and interpreting which helps understand how writers move from marginalization to recognition and one can even say from dispossession to possession.

By adopting Derrida’s theory and using it along with Deleuze and Guattari’s, the critic is freed from conforming to the potential ‘dictatorship’ of literary criticism rules or norms. It is especially interesting to apply Derrida’s fragmentation as another reading grid to Wright’s corpus as it offers a non-conformist approach to literature which frees the writer from the ‘stringent’ constraints of formalist writing norms. This approach is suitable for the analysis of Richard Wright’s novels but also his protagonists: Richard, Big Boy, Silas, Sue, Mann and Bigger who are all non-conformist and refuse to comply with the lingering principles of dispossession. To express his own non-conformism, Wright wrote from the margin, which makes it relevant to use some of Deleuze’s psycho-literary concepts of the margin. These concepts are also particularly suitable to the study of Wright’s corpus because *Uncle Tom’s*

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<sup>7</sup> Deleuze’s concepts usually do not carry their apparent meaning. In a Deleuzian sense, territorialization is the setting of rules and standards by a dominant group and made to be followed by everybody. Because, these rules and standards, however, do not usually take into consideration minority groups’ particularities, the latter attempt to de-territorialize them. De-territorialization simply means minorities’ refusal to abide by the dominant rules and willingness to re-territorialize them. Re-territorialization is the creation by the minorities of new rules and standards according to their own perception.

*Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* stand as real protest novels that were written from the margin of American society and canon. Wright's protagonists de-territorialize collective conventional norms and re-territorialize them into an individual way of doing in order to raise another consciousness and sensibility that can offer an alternative. Wright's style and protest novels allowed him to de-territorialize structural literary conventions through lines of flight, to finally succeed in re-territorializing Black American literature. This move from the margin to the center ensured the recognition of his literary genre by the American canonic literature while confirming Wright's own recognition as a protest writer.

Dispossession and non-conformism are underexplored concepts in Wright's works. The basic purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine Wright's protagonists in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* as illustrations of dispossessed characters through the literary and cultural lenses of African American and postcolonial studies. By drawing on Derrida's and Deleuze's respective concepts, renewed analyses on Richard Wright's works from cultural perspectives. To a lesser extent, a literary standpoint too will be proposed too by considering the very importance of dispossession and non-conformism in the African American literary landscape in general and Wright's role in particular. This combined cultural-literary approach will be characterized by the recurrent uses of context and pretext to illustrate the narrative and vice versa.

The study is purposefully focused on the protagonists, because a deep look into their characters' developments reveals they are omniscient of their fictional worlds. Whether in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, or *Black Boy* every character in these novels has a link with the protagonists who know everything about all of them. In this respect, their personal experiences can be seen as an account of the whole black community in the novels in a way that leads to believe the individual is the collective. However, as the protagonists in the three novels are not the only dispossessed characters, it seems incomplete to restrict the whole analysis to them. That is why other characters such as Bobo, Lester, Buck, Johnny-Boy, and Sarah in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Bessie, Mary Dalton, Gus and Mrs. Thomas in *Native Son*, Granny, Ella, Harrison, Griggs and Hoskins in *Black Boy* will also be analyzed since they share dispossession with the main characters of each story.

The first part of this analysis will thus be devoted to African American traditional literary writing through the lens of dispossession. By studying the evolution from slave narratives to the Harlem Renaissance, I will show how slave narratives gave shape to dispossession and allowed their writers to regain identity to reach a form of possession. This first step will lead to explore Wright's writing program inspired by the Harlem Renaissance but

based on the Chicagoan School to decipher how he denounced the oppressive influence of his community's spirituality and his alienation from the private and public spheres. By denouncing all these hardships through his deconstructionist school of thought, Wright finally gained possession himself, as this part will demonstrate.

The second part will analyze Wright's expression of dispossession and non-conformism in his three major novels, namely *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. More specifically, it will highlight the various forms of dispossession, their impact on Wright's fictional world and characters, and how the Wrightean language represents and conveys these issues. The act of using language in a straightforward and shocking manner will be referred as "wri(gh)ting", since Richard Wright carried in his very name the power of words and wri(gh)ting. In other words, I interpret Wright's fight against dispossession as a means to use words and violence as weapons to gain or regain possession.

In the third part, non-conformism in Wright's writing and in the corpus will be unraveled to show how relocation and individual repositioning can lead to repossession. By laying out Wright's questioning of the social, economic and political status quo, special focus will be put on how the writer defied traditional conventions in a gesture of repossessing the self, his identity and that of his community. By reclaiming language, the "wrightean" expression is thus articulated at its best to show how the act of writing was part of Wright's very existence, bearing in mind the very name "Wright" can also be read to "wri(gh)te".



**PART ONE**

**DISPOSSESSION IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN  
LITERARY TRADITION:  
FROM SLAVE NARRATIVES TO  
RICHARD WRIGHT'S NON-CONFORMIST WRITING**

If dispossession is a salient subject in Richard Wright's life and in his writings, it is certainly not a simple coincidence. To understand how Wright came to make of the fight against dispossession his hobby horse in his literary career, it is judicious to trace back the history of dispossession in Black American literature as a whole from the slave narratives to the Harlem Renaissance period and beyond to show how the different periods were influential in creating and shaping new literary genres which participated in the making of the Black American identity. Analyzing Wright's writing, it should be considered the historical-literary process of what we may call dispossession and non-conformism as Wright was the product of a long-standing history of Black American literary tradition starting from slave narratives up to the Harlem Renaissance that led the way to his protest writing.

This part will serve as a historical-literary background to understand Wright's writing process and progression from the margin to the center. How did he describe dispossession? Did the historical-literary background influence him? Was it a useful tool to him? To contextualize dispossession, the issue will be addressed in Black American history in this first part. By analyzing early slave narratives such as the narrative of Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), the one of Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) and of Harriet Jacobs (1815-1897), the study will show how they represented and transmitted their lives and perceptions to the next generations. Literary history will be essential to understand the context of dispossession. However, the socio-economic context Wright lived in will also be analyzed to show how he emerged as a protest writer. This first part is thus inscribed in a historic and cultural framework in order to assess the progression of the Black American community and its literary expression. This analysis will lead from the collective to the personal by highlighting the "Wrightean" expression of spirituality which was oppressive and alienating to Wright. His style, or protest literature, which is seen as the most American form of literature, helped him portray the situation of Black Americans in the 1940s and 1950s who, despite the abolition of slavery, were suffering from Jim Crow laws and were still dispossessed of their fundamental rights. Wright's "documentary" role will thus be underlined in this part.

# CHAPTER I: FROM SLAVE NARRATIVES TO THE LITERARY HARLEM RENAISSANCE

In spite of the abolition of slavery, Blacks' lives remained punctuated by all forms of dispossession, be they economic, socio-cultural, political or spiritual, which led them to make use of various strategies to put an end to their social predicament. Writing has been one of the means used by Blacks throughout history. Writing and telling what they were dispossessed of is the topic of all slave narratives. By testifying and denouncing their conditions, but also by arguing against slavery or reflecting on it, slaves and former slaves participated to the evolution of the genre. *Encyclopedia Britannica* online defines a slave narrative as follows:

An account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally. Slave narratives comprise one of the most influential traditions in American literature, shaping the form and themes of some of the most celebrated and controversial writing, both in fiction and in autobiography, in the history of the United States. (*Encyclopedia Britannica* online)

Dispossession was thus already present in slave narratives and the tradition is perpetuated with contemporary writers. Wright's Chicagoan School helped him craft his own literary model to denounce more vigorously and above all directly the lingering dispossession of his time. Thus, by taking a retrospective look at Black American literary tradition through slave narratives, this section will focus on the expression of dispossession in writings to deal with the evolution of Black American literary tradition and to address Wright's writing program who proposed a brand new model nurtured by the Chicagoan School.

## 1. Dispossession in Slave Narratives

The history of Black American literary genres dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The very first literary genres embraced by Black Americans was poetry inspired by the slavery condition which allowed former slaves to delight themselves with sweet lyrics in order to forget their sorrows. Indeed, the question of slavery, which to this day remains one of the worst forms of dispossession that Black Americans have ever experienced, sounds like a siren in the early attempts at Black American writing. The writing of dispossession was expressed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in flexible forms due to the palpable tensions that prevailed between abolitionists and slavery proponents. Slaves were not only deprived of physical freedom but also of freedom of thought. Before crossing the Atlantic to reach the colonies, the captives already had their own cultures which was expressed and transmitted through oral tradition. However, once in the

hands of their masters, the slaves no longer had the right to express their original culture as they did not speak the language of the colonizers and were even denied the right to speak their language.

Considered as sub-humans devoid of all intellectual capacities, no formal education was granted to slaves. As Anne-Claire Faucquez states in her study,

Slaves were considered as personal properties which could be kidnapped, plundered, bought, sold or bequeathed. [...] Slaves were attributed purchase price, their value was estimated and counted, added, subtracted or multiplied in post-mortal inventories, slave masters' account books and sales bills<sup>8</sup>. (Faucquez 41-42)

Intellectual dispossession was the rule and any intellectual initiative such as self-teaching or writing was perceived as a non-conformist act and treated with suspicion and contempt. One of the first slaves who challenged the ban on intellectual expression through writing was Phillis Wheatley whose work is highly symbolic. Phillis Wheatley published "*Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*" in 1773 and was the first black woman to achieve international fame as a poet. Because of her great mastery of the English language and the very high quality of her poems, the intellectual property of Wheatley was questioned by Whites who could hardly believe that a female slave could make such an artistic production (Gates 313). She brilliantly addressed the issue of Blacks' dispossession from a religious and moral perspective but, in an attempt to dispossess her of her intellectual and moral pretensions, she was brought to justice to prove that she was really the author of her writings. Nevertheless, she succeeded in defending

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<sup>8</sup> The translation is mine and some words have been left out for the sake of syntactic accuracy, and to allow more fluidity when reading the text, all French quotes have been translated into English. The original versions will be inserted as footnotes. The original version reads as follows: « Les esclaves étaient considérés comme des biens meubles, qui pouvaient être kidnappés, pillés, achetés, vendus ou légués. [...] Les esclaves se voyaient attribuer un prix de vente, on estimait leur valeur qui était comptabilisée, additionnée, soustraite ou multipliée dans les inventaires après décès, les livres de comptes de marchands et les actes de vente. »  
Faucquez also talks of the triangular trade as "le commerce de l'or noir ou du bois d'ébène" (Faucquez 41).

herself and, therefore, her “Poems on Various Subjects” was recognized as her artistic property and republished several times<sup>9</sup> (Gates 314).

Phillis Wheatley did not lose sight of Blacks’ dispossession as humans. In “On being brought from Africa to America,” she, though subtly, addresses the issue of Blacks’ fragmented lives, freedom dispossession, and above all the paradox between religious claims and slavery, which can be inter-textually paralleled with Wright’s critic of religion as a tool of dispossession. By way of illustration, Wheatley regrets that after the white man claims to redeem her soul through God as “a Savior,” the white man continues to “view [her] sable race with scornful eye, [saying her] color is a diabolic die” (Wheatley, 1773). If we look at one excerpt of Wright in *Black Boy*, it is interesting to note the parallel with Wheatley. Wright regrets in *Black Boy* that the preacher who teaches him God’s ways “is going to eat all his chicken [and shamelessly] “tossed back his head and roared with laughter”<sup>10</sup> (*BB*, 34), which is reminiscent of Wheatley’s. Very often, the earliest slave literary works really raise the debate over the reasons for dispossession, namely how human beings come to dispossess their fellows of freedom and dignity.

The first slave narratives were interested in writing about dispossession, be they male or female dispossession. Some of these works related to women in a patriarchal society where art and writing were normally the virtual territory of white male writers. Black American women thus went through two forms of rejections: being black and female. They did not escape what Kimberle Crenshaw conceptualized in the 1980s with her concept of intersectionality. She showed how the different forms of oppression were connected and how American institutions

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<sup>9</sup> Phillis Wheatley’s victorious judicial battle came to an end with an attestation of artistic ownership delivered by the jury. The attestation reads as follows:

WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

His Excellency THOMAS HUTCHINSON, Governor

The Hon. ANDREW OLIVIA, Lieutenant-Governor

The Hon. Thomas Hubbard, The Rev. Charles Chauncey, D.D.

The Hon. John Erving, The Rev. Mather Byles, D.D.

The Hon. James Pitts, The Rev. Ed. Pemberton, D.D.

The Hon. Harrison Gray, The Rev. Andrew Elliot, D. D.

The Hon. James Bowdoin, The Rev. Samuel Cooper, D. D.

John Hancoq, Esq, The Rev. Mr. Saumel Mather

Joseph Green Esq, The Rev. Mr. John Morehead

Richard Carey Esq, Mr. John Wheatley, her Master. (*Guttenberg.org*, 1996)

<sup>10</sup> *BB* stands for *Black Boy*. From now on, every time the novel of the corpus is quoted, it will be referenced between parentheses by my own conventional acronyms: *UTC* will stand for *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *NS* will stand for *Native Son*.

were oppressive. Black women thus stand at the crossroads of social, cultural, political, economic, racial and sexist predicaments. As Kimberle Crenshaw pinpoints:

The experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism [...]. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both. (Crenshaw 1243-1244)

In this respect, black female slaves' lives and narratives echo the concept of intersectionality. Black women had no say in social issues and could not be educated, therefore, they fell back on writing as a means to denounce their lower status as slaves and as women in society. That is why a few slave narratives written by women disregarded slavery to express their desire to move from the margin to the heart of the Church to advocate for equality and dignity before God. They thus asked for their liberation from the yoke of sexism. Zilpha Elaw, Maria W. Stewart and Jarena Lee can be singled out as some of the black female slave writers who addressed gender-based dispossession in their respective *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travel and Labor of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Color* in 1846, *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality and Meditations* in 1832, and *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* in 1836<sup>11</sup>. All these works not only deal with morality, the condition of Blacks, race relations, but also and above all, they reveal gender relations in general and in churches in particular while proposing, for the first time, a black feminine perspective.

Due to the influence of religion and ethics in human relations during slavery, early black writings question the religious and moral bases of human dispossession. How can one explain the promotion and practice of slavery in a society with strong puritanical pretensions? Many

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<sup>11</sup> Elaw was one of the outspoken women of her time. She was early captivated by Christianity and joined the Methodist Society in 1908. She later attended a revival camp in 1817, after which she started delivering public speeches against spiritual dispossession. Her deep love for the dispossessed certainly convinced her to open a school for black children in Burlington to help them move from dispossession to possession. However, because she believed in religion as a powerful tool to trigger compassion towards dispossessed people, she left the school to embrace a new career as an itinerant preacher. While Victorian British clergy was against women's preaching and criticized Elaw for her preaching mission, she challenged this stance and continued to preach from the United States to Great Britain. She finally died on 25 August 1873. For details on Zilpha Elaw, see Zilpha Elaw. *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846).

Jarena Lee was born on February 11, 1783 and died on February 3, 1864. She was one of the first women to challenge traditional church practices. She engaged in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1819 where she preached against slavery that she perceived as a dispossession of Blacks' humanity. She also challenged the provision of the Methodist Church that women should not preach. In reality, Lee's perseverance in preaching was made easier by the Second Great Awakening which advocated for equal access to spiritual services without any regard to gender. For more details on Lee's commitment, see Lee Jarena. *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1836).

early black writings attempt to answer this question from a spiritual perspective. From this point of view, still embedded in the religious perception of human life, many spiritual slave writers explained dispossession as being a human condition and even saw it as a divine will which was patient with cross-human dispossession before intervening to save the weak and restore their dignity as human beings. This was, for example, the case of Jupiter Hammon who addressed dispossession through religious lenses, considering human dispossession as universal and deriving from the will of God<sup>12</sup>:

My dear brethren, we are many of us seeking for temporal freedom, and I pray God will grant your desire; if we are slaves it is by the permission of God; if must be free by the power of the most high [*sic*] God; be not discouraged, but cheerfully perform the duty of the day, sensible that the power that created the heavens and the earth and causeth [*sic*] the greater light to rule the day and the lesser to rule the night, can cause a universal freedom. (Hammon 101)

Hammon views the dispossession of freedom as a universal human condition known to God. The only way out of dispossession is to be resilient and obedient to the dispossessor while waiting for God to change the situation and bring freedom for good. Hammon's approach is in keeping with Wright who also perceived dispossession as a universal human condition (not a black man's concern only), except that, contrary to Hammon who territorializes the debate in the religious sphere, Wright rejected any metaphysical origin of human dispossession. Rather, he de-territorialized the debate to the pragmatic sphere and put man in the center of dispossession, considering him as the sole responsible for his liberation through individual and collective actions. That is why, in *Native Son*, when the black preacher gives Bigger a crucifix and asks him to rely on it for his salvation, "he wants to tear the cross from his throat and throw it away" (*NS*, 266). The same goes with Richard who, in *Black Boy*, protests against his mother Ella's telling him to wait for God to provide food (*BB*, 22). Ella sees dispossession and its handling eye in eye with Hammon while Wright denied any metaphysical force's intervention in handling it.

Actually, writing enabled slaves to express their ability for artistic creation while they denounced, at the same time, the bondage they were victims of. Writing must be seen as a means to repossess identity as Blacks and humans. This conquest of identity was facilitated by the abolition of slavery. In fact, following the Proclamation of Emancipation, former slaves were supposed to be freed from social and cultural dispossession, to gain progressive social and

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<sup>12</sup> Jupiter Hammon (1711-1806) was a domestic slave in Queens, New York. He published his first poem "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries" in 1760 which deals with shared humanity and common bonds.

identity recognitions which enhanced the status of Black Americans as human racial entities in possession of cultural and spiritual values. These cultural and spiritual values were claimed by Blacks who further promoted them through writing and literature. Thus, after the first sketches in fiction, Blacks found interest in the autobiographical slave narratives to “describe the difficult and painful daily lives of slaves, [...] to take an interest in the racial issue and the place of Blacks in society [...] and to describe the struggle of free Blacks in the Northern States and inform about the reality of racism in free states”<sup>13</sup> (Dualé, 2017, 54). In doing so, Blacks’ creative works give, to some extent, historical truth to their situation of dispossession and as Dualé argues, they really “are valuable historical sources, as they inform about the lives of slaves in the Confederate States”<sup>14</sup> (Dualé 54). Thus, slave narratives appeared as a means for former slaves to repossess their history, but also their identity and to fight for true emancipation.

Artistic creations enabled Blacks to advocate not only for political action against slavery but also for individual self-awareness and resistance. In this respect, slave narratives denounced either captivity (if we think of Equiano’s narrative) or the terrible life and working conditions of Blacks on plantations. Early slave narratives already suggested dispossession and paved the way for modern and contemporary literature. Indeed, contemporary African American literary works such as Wright’s *Black Boy* and Morrison’s *Beloved* must be understood as neo-slave narratives as they tackle the absence of freedom more directly. From Min Pun’s perspective, “The writers of neo-slave narratives write from a perspective informed and enriched by the study of [...] the complicated history of race relations in [...] the United States. They, therefore, are free to use their imagination to explore unacknowledged and elusive effects of [racism]” (Pun 58). Wright particularly remodeled the slave narrative perspective thanks to protest autobiographical novels that not only depict his own oppressed life but also his rebellion against racism. Wright’s remodeling of the neo-slave narrative genre significantly laid in the ideological content he gave it. Indeed, *Black Boy* and *Native Son* launched the debate on the place and role of the individual in an oppressive social milieu.

While slave narratives sometimes depicted and denounced human bondage and all its corollaries, some of the first narratives insisted on the cruelty of a white seaman throughout the voyage across the Atlantic to the coasts of the United States and the inhuman experience of

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<sup>13</sup> « Ils [les récits d’esclaves] peuvent être regroupés dans le temps en deux catégories : Ceux écrits avant 1836 décrivent le quotidien difficile et douloureux des esclaves, alors que ceux qui apparaissent entre 1840 et 1850 commencent à s’intéresser à la question raciale et à la place des Noirs dans la société. En général, cette seconde catégorie décrit le combat des Noirs libres dans les États du Nord et informe de la réalité du racisme dans les États libres. »

<sup>14</sup> « Les récits autobiographiques d’esclaves (*slave narratives*) sont des sources historiques précieuses, car elles informent sur la vie des esclaves dans les États de la Confédération. »



slaves on plantations in the hands of foremen's and masters' cruelty. Some slave narratives like Equiano's shows that the Middle Passage was appalling as crowding slaves in the ships, caning and getting rid of them off the ships were common practices<sup>15</sup>. Slave narratives also reveal the dispossession of homeland, spirituality, in short, of cultural identity:

The enslavement of the Negro in the United States destroyed not only his family ties and his household gods; it effaced whatever memories of the African homeland that had survived the Middle Passage. The destruction of a common tradition and religious beliefs and practices reduced the Negro to a mere « atom » without a personality or social identity. (Frazier in Dualé, 2017, 31)

Besides being captured and made to work on American plantations, slaves lost not only their freedom but also their cultural identity. If we consider culture cannot be taken from human beings, the conditions of the captives suggest a process of total de-humanization as they were deprived of family ties, traditions and beliefs. Black Americans' experience has been pushed into the margin in an effort to force it into forgetfulness to suppress the value of the group's importance (Barroso-Fontanel 11). Slave narratives allow this experience to be de-marginalized, to take it from the unknown to the known. Slave narratives must be understood as an attempt by former slaves to materialize their cultural identity in writing so as to prevent it from falling into forgetfulness or effacement. However, because materializing slaves' black culture contributed to perpetuate their collective memory and, therefore, to raise future awareness against long-standing dispossession, many black writers were faced with their masters' threatening attempts to keep them from writing. Just as Phillis Wheatley was challenged to prove the ownership of her collection of poems, other slave narrative writers were also faced with Whites' attempts to silence their artistic voice. Equiano was faced with pro-slavery Whites' attempts to discredit and prevent his narrative from being published and sold, just as Wright's *Native Son* was initially banned from American schools<sup>16</sup>. From the outset of his narrative, Equiano informs the reader of attempts to silence him: "I am neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant [...]. An invidious falsehood appeared in the Oracle of the 25th, and the Star of the 27th of April 1792, with a view to hurt my character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of my narrative" (Equiano 1-5).

One could be tempted to argue that the questioning of Equiano's slave narrative is somewhat legitimate given the likelihood of what Tzvetan Todorov calls memory abuse.

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<sup>16</sup> Olaudah Equiano was an abolitionist writer. He was captured in West Africa and sold to Europe. He was then sold twice before recovering his freedom in 1766.

Indeed, Todorov warns against claiming too highly the victim's costume, which can lead to memory abuse: "Being a victim," he asserts, "gives you the right to complain, to protest, and to demand. However, the stakes of memory are too great to be left to enthusiasm and anger"<sup>17</sup> (Todorov in Ricœur 104). Paul Ricœur himself comments that "this posture generates an exorbitant privilege, which puts the rest of the world in the position of debtor of debts"<sup>18</sup> (104). Equiano's detractors might have wondered whether enthusiasm and anger influenced his story in such a way as to mar his sincerity or credibility. Nevertheless, on closer inspection, all these attempts to question slave narratives can be put in line with what Paul Ricœur describes, to some extent, as "memory dispossession." Indeed, Ricœur maintains that memory can be subjected to external pressures to prevent it from being expressed. Since memory is perceived in this context as power, the dominant group makes use of pressure, threat, intimidation, physical or moral violence, tricks or flattery to dispossess the dominated group of any memory capable of questioning the principle of dispossession and, so to speak, contribute to their emancipation (Ricœur, 1999). Writing, therefore, appeared and appears for Blacks as a means of re-appropriating and representing their memory.

Despite the various means set up to dispossess them from telling their memories in a way to raise consciousness, slave narrative writers such as Equiano challenged these threats and accounted for their past experiences. In his writing, Equiano particularly accounts for his trip to North America, which triggers sympathy towards slaves as he accounts for his own experience as a dispossessed man. In fact, Equiano was first dispossessed of his native land or, one may say, he was de-territorialized from his homeland, as he was captured and sold out for slavery overseas. He was, then, separated from his sister who was captured along with him, dispossessing him of his parents and siblings. During the journey, he was faced with inhuman practices such as chaining humans together as cattle, flogging reluctant slaves, and throwing some into the sea as his narrative attests:

While below deck I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat [...]. I now wished for my last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands and laid me across the [...] windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely [...]. (Equiano 70-71)

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<sup>17</sup> « Avoir été victime vous donne le droit de vous plaindre, de protester, et de réclamer. Or les enjeux de la mémoire sont trop grands pour être laissés à l'enthousiasme et à la colère. »

<sup>18</sup> « Cette posture engendre un privilège exorbitant, qui met le reste du monde en position de débiteur de créances. »

One can see how horribly the process of dispossession of freedom takes place. The dispossessed slaves have to endure physical pain such as sicknesses, hunger and beatings to such an extent that they sometimes consider suicide as a credible alternative. As Equiano refuses to eat and prefers death, he refreshes the reader's memory of the slaves who seized the slightest opportunity during the Middle Passage to throw themselves into the sea and got drowned to escape from lifelong dispossession. Narratives like Equiano's unravel the slaves' living conditions during their shipping to America and as a perpetuation of Black American memory, these narratives can send sad and pitiful echoes of slavery around America, contributing then to raise consciousness and negative reactions to slavery.

Most of the time, those who were dispossessed of their freedom lacked the notion of time and space as their memories were dispossessed by recurrent hardships. Equiano, for instance, lost the notion of time and space as he spent the majority of his time on the seas. Worse of all was his dispossession of important cultural identity traits such as his name and language as he was renamed Gustavus Vassa before finding himself on the plantations where he was lonely because there were "Africans of all languages. [...] [He] had no person to speak to that he could understand" (29, 31). It is important to notice the linguistic fragmentation which kept slaves from communicating properly as Equiano testifies. As he moved from one place to another to work as a slave, Equiano revealed the fragmented lives of slaves like him. Richard, the protagonist of *Black Boy*, also experiences a fragmented life. Following his father's flight and his mother's stroke, he is taken from one place to another, torn between street and orphanage lives and coercive family Adventism which keeps him from building a stable identity. Before dealing with the appalling travelling conditions, Equiano's narrative reveals a dehumanizing slave market scene which testifies total human dispossession: "On the signal given (as the beat of a drum) the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best. The noise and clamor [...] serve not a little to increase the apprehension of the Terrified Africans" (Equiano 29). Such testimonies are of the kind to expose the marginalization of black humanity and trigger the reader's protest against inhuman conditions.

Even if autobiographical slave narratives still drew on the principles of neoclassicism<sup>19</sup>, they already foreshadowed the appearance of the literary protest against freedom and memory dispossession which dominated Wright's generation and writing. Dispossessed former slaves were already expressing their thirst for freedom as individuals to be determined by their free will, and questioned vigorously the principles of slavery, as one of Equiano's pleas suggests:

Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations now rendered more dear [*sic!*] by their separation from their kindred? [...] Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty. (29-30)

In other words, Equiano is already emphasizing the importance of freedom for the individual and the community as Wright will demonstrate later. Equiano is proud of his skin color and his culture without missing the opportunity to denounce the internal social flaws of Africans who dispossess their own brothers by capturing and handing them over to slave masters:

We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause of public rejoicing is celebrated in public dances which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion [...]. I still look back with pleasure on the first scenes of my life, though that pleasure [...] has been mingled with sorrow. One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both, and, without giving us time to cry, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, and ran with us into the wood. Here they tied our hands, and continued to carry us as far as they could. (Equiano 4, 17)

Equiano, while beautifying black culture, does not spare his own community's complicity in slavery. Actually, he lets the reader understand that slavery is easily carried out because Blacks themselves take part in it by capturing and selling their own community members. This approach "would have a general impact on twentieth century African American literature, including writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison" (Constanzo 36).

While Equiano does not hide Blacks' cultural flaws, this is a signal inviting Blacks to re-appropriate their culture as a whole with pride, including its most glorious and sometimes gloomy aspects. Equiano's use of confident, exuberant and often provocative tone and style of

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<sup>19</sup> Neoclassicism refers to the art produced after antiquity but inspired by antiquity. It advocates for a shift from the artistic authoritative equation of the 17<sup>th</sup> classicism to a longing for the sublime, so that romantic fantasies, suggestive allusions, and bizarre inventions come to be more highly valued. The biggest difference between the two is the grammar and language used with each movement. Classic authors often riddle their works with figures of speech and highfalutin words that they often made up themselves. Neoclassic writers regularize grammar and vocabulary. The basic and less obscure become the trend (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2020).

writing is re-appropriated and used by Wright in his works. “I remember we never polluted the name of the object of our adoration [...] and were totally unacquainted with swearing,” Equiano says, beautifying his folks’ culture in his quest for regaining his original culture while subtly and provocatively tackling Whites’ civilization: “And all those terms of abuse find their way so readily and copiously in the languages of more civilized people” (Equiano 10). Equiano’s procedure, here, can be termed a stereotype inversion technique which consists in putting the black man in the white man’s place to redirect the stereotype against him so as to make him experience it and understand what it feels like to be stereotyped. Such a subtle provocation through language is very interesting as it is going to be re-appropriated by the next generations of black writers such as Wright who also teases Whites when he writes in *Uncle Tom’s Children*: “Lynching was passionately advocated as a solution for the problem of the negro” (UTC, 145). As Equiano’s narrative plays out, once on the plantations, dispossession becomes total and Equiano, despite being admired by his masters for his hard work, is neither permitted to learn, read nor write, which deprives him of any intellectual qualities and prevents him from self-awareness as will be the case with Wright’s writings.

The issue of intellectual dispossession was more than ever important in the process of domination. Indeed, lest the dominated group became aware of their situation and organized their revolt, the dominant group needed to keep captives and then slaves away from knowledge. That is the reason why barriers were established to keep slaves in the margin far away from reading and writing. The expression of this type of dispossession is well shown in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) by Frederick Douglass<sup>20</sup>. Douglass, just as Equiano, found himself in a context where many southern pro-slavery people thought of the black man as lacking intellectual capacity to produce art or act as a citizen, an attitude which was already displayed to Wheatley when she was brought to court to prove her artistic ownership. In such conditions, former slaves were obliged to produce high level art to prove their intellectual capacity and skills and, therefore, to advocate for the end of the intellectual dispossession of their people.

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<sup>20</sup> Frederick Douglass was an African American abolitionist writer. Contrary to Olaudah Equiano who was brought from Africa to Europe, Douglass was born in slavery. In addition to his writing, Douglass was a steadfast social reformer advocating for the end of slavery through spectacular speeches and conferences. He was one of the first African American intellectuals in the United States to gain public acclaim due to his poignant anti-slavery standpoints. Even after the abolition of slavery, he continued to denounce the slavery conditions which lingered on in the African American community. Douglass was a firm believer in the equality of all peoples, whether white, black, female, native American, or Chinese immigrants. He was also a believer in dialogue and in making alliances across racial and ideological divides, and in the liberal values of the U.S. Constitution.

Literary history reveals writing remains one of the best tools to address dispossession, especially when it is used as a tool to recover from hardship and trauma. Boris Cyrulnik talks of “resilience literature” which can be understood as the fact of “writing to recover a new development after a psychic agony” (Cyrulnik 2015). By writing about this agony, the writer does not mean to perpetuate his pain but rather uses writing as a means to control the post-traumatic situation which occurs. When slave narrative writers decided to write about their own experience, they were fulfilling a collective or individual memory duty and, indeed, some slave narrative writers such as Frederick Douglass did it in a way to move their readers emotionally but, above all, to prove the consciousness, insightfulness and resilience dispossession implies. Douglass’ artistic commitment inspired many early black artists in the post-slavery period to denounce on-paper-emancipation and factual slavery. William Lloyd Garrison goes further as to “vouch that any reader unaffected by Douglass’ story must indeed have a heart of stone” (Garrison in Cliffsnotes Editors 7). But how can dispossessed former slaves be resilient and perpetuate their collective memory without controlling the means of literary production?

The only way to be safe from any constraint and to promote one’s literary production is to be financially strong and to find one’s own communication tools. That is certainly why some writers such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany respectively created their own journals *The Mystery* (1843) and *The North Star* (1847). Nevertheless, like the majority of former slaves’ journals, these publications were short-lived certainly due to the lack of sufficient financial means and the competition of white journals (Dualé, 2017, 56) at a time when former slaves and their white abolitionist supporters were still socially and culturally marginalized, and politically prosecuted. Notwithstanding political intimidations, Frederick Douglass, who was a fierce follower of freedom, largely collaborated with white abolitionists, and notably with Lloyd Garrison, to call for the abolition of slavery, all the turmoil of which he lived through<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Because some white abolitionists like Lloyd Garrison were against slavery, they helped Blacks in their process of emancipation. Garrison really played a seminal role in promoting former slaves’ works. “Abolitionists did collaborate with slaves and former slaves to write and publish their testimonies and to create their own journals to spread their messages, [...] to denounce the peculiar institution in writing and campaigns for the abolition of slavery. These journals encouraged readers to take action and fight against slavery and injustice and advocated self-determination” (Dualé, 2017, 56, my translation). Abolitionists like Garrison did not mince their words to denounce the institution of slavery. As a result, they were negatively viewed by politicians and were even prosecuted in Southern States as troublemakers. Garrait-Bourrier provides clear and concrete information on Garrison’s troubles with state authorities: “Garrison’s words, the slave revolts and insurrections, made a rather bad reputation to the abolitionists who passed for trouble-makers disturbing law and order. The Georgian Senate even offered a reward of 1000 dollars for the arrest of Garrison, who was not close to one arrest since he already had been in prison for offending a slave trader in the good society of New England, Francis Todd” (Garrait-Bourrier, 2001, 10, quoted in Dualé, 2017, 57).

In his narrative, he was inspired by the autobiographical model of Olaudah Equiano and a hundred years later, Douglass himself will be imitated by Wright.

Through his slave narrative, Douglass showed his thirst for knowledge, particularly of himself (self-identity), whereas he was forbidden to learn and any attempt to break this rule could result in serious troubles. In the spirit of the slave master, a black subject's learning attempt "[was] part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit" (Douglass 1), while for Douglass, "the most interesting feature of [his] life here [was] learning to read and write" (458). However, since teaching young Douglass was deemed dangerous, Mrs. Auld, his secret teacher, was ordered by her husband to stop teaching him: "Now if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master" (29). As Douglass himself revealed, such words "sank into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought [...]. I now understood what had been [...] the white man's power to enslave the black man" (29). Simply put, the words of Douglass's master revealed the power of knowledge to him as it is made clear that the road out of dispossession to regain possession, of all types, by regaining freedom necessarily goes through education. Therefore, Douglass did not give up self-teaching notwithstanding his master's prohibition. On the contrary, he broke the rule and started reading and writing alone as evidenced in his narrative: "Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out [...] to learn how to read" (29). These skills helped him regain his freedom and his autobiographical model also inspired twentieth century writers such as Wright.

Even if Wright's biographers do not pay specific attention to his interest in Douglass's autobiographical model, the amazing similarities between the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Black Boy* suggest that Wright, who was a voracious reader, certainly read Douglass and was inspired by him. As can be seen, Wright's autobiography and Douglass's could be summed up in three words: dispossession, non-conformism and emancipation. With regard to the blatant thematic similarities of their works, it can be suggested that Wright re-appropriated Douglass's autobiographical model to account for his own dispossession. In the first place, Douglass "suffers much from hunger" (Douglass 23), just as "Many mornings, [Wright] is too weak from hunger to pull the grass" (*BB*, 37). In the second place, reading books ushered Douglass into rebellion by leading him "to abhor and detest [his] enslavers" (Douglass 35), just as reading books rebelled Wright by leading him into protest: "The white South said they knew niggers [...]. Well, the white South had never known me. The white South said I had a 'place' in life. Well, I had never felt my 'place' in life" (*BB*, 283). In the third place, just as

Douglass “resolves to run away” from his master’s house to gain full emancipation (Douglass 37), so does Wright who decides that “as soon as night comes [he] would run away” (*BB*, 39) first from the orphanage and later from his grand family to emancipate himself from his grandmother’s spiritual coercion.

If Douglass depicted intellectual dispossession in his slave narrative, spiritual dispossession is not outdone in many slave narratives. Beside physical dispossession, that of the souls reveals as much how this phenomenon deprived Blacks of their humanity. For the slave master, there was no such better tool than religion to stiffen Blacks’ souls into inexpressiveness. Yet when Blacks’ souls became inexpressive, they experienced double death, because when their souls could not be expressed in a context of full physical dispossession, there was nothing else left from black humanity. Simply put, black captives and slaves were dispossessed of humanity. In this process of soul dispossession, slave narratives usually pointed to religion as a tool of dispossession. That is why most slave narrators, be they male or female, described what can be called the hypocrisy of the Christian slave master who turned out severer than the non-believer master:

A great many times have we poor creatures been nearly perishing with hunger, when food in abundance lay moldering in the safe and smoke-house, and our pious mistress was aware of the fact; and yet that mistress and her husband would kneel every morning, and pray that God would bless them in basket and store! (Douglass 46)

It is clear from this excerpt that Douglass unravels the dichotomy between the slave master’s attitude towards the slave and his praying God for blessing. Religion is, here, a tool used to submit other people to dispossession because they are not considered as human beings possessing flesh and souls.

In the period of slavery, religion really played a central role in human dispossession in a way that exposed the dichotomous positioning of Christianity vis-à-vis the dispossession of freedom. To convince and assuage slaves in order to perpetuate slavery, missionaries taught Blacks unconditional docility, patience and obedience as key Christian values, which can be regarded as a part of the subtle means, mentioned by Ricœur earlier, used by the dominant group to prevent their collective and individual memories from being expressed. The internalization of the so-called key Christian values aimed at killing all inclinations to revolt or escape, as Jacobs confirms in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: “The slaveholder came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slave enough religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters” (Jacobs 76). In other words, it is all about convincing the dispossessed slaves to remain obedient to their dispossessors. Such a hypocrisy is seen in



Jacobs's narrative through the character of Reverend Pike who makes Ephesians 6: 5 his favorite biblical reference whenever he preaches among Blacks (77), while forgetting that before arriving at Ephesians 6: 5, there is Galatians 5: 1 that he never mentions<sup>22</sup>. Through the characterization of Reverend Pike who epitomizes the Church, Jacobs suggests that Christianity is only one of the tools that has made it possible to dispossess Blacks of their traditional African beliefs and alienate them into another belief which tolerates and encourages the enslavement of other human beings considered inferior. In this respect, religion was even used to justify violence just as Douglass also reveals: "I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. [...] In justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture" (Douglass 33), which moves Douglass emotionally. The same can be said of Wright's *Black Boy* where he denounces Aunt Granny finding religious reasons for meting out corporal punishment on Richard, which has a significant emotional impact on him.

Wherever human dispossession takes place, the decaying emotional state of those who are dispossessed cannot be denied in so far as they are aware of their right to exist as free human beings but yet remain powerless to dispossessors. Nothing is more painful for people who are deprived of their freedom and compelled to keep silent and just obey. Human bondage poses this issue of dire emotional situation which occurs, especially when the dispossessed subjects are females. Readers are made to understand this dreadful and painful situation through most slave narratives; for instance, in Douglass's when he states, "I do not recollect of seeing my mother by the light of day [...]. Very little communication ever took place between us [...]. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial" (Douglass 2-3). In Harriet Jacobs's narrative, female slaves' conditions are regularly described and the reader can grasp the horror of dispossession when she writes: "In such cases [forbidden sexual relationship] the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by anyone who knows its history. But if the white man is the father, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market" (58).

As can be seen, in addition to being physically shocked by forced labor, black women also endured emotional shock through the sexual relationships they were forced to maintain with their masters. What is more, at the birth of a child deriving from a slave-and-master sexual intercourse, the child was, generally, snatched from its mother and sold elsewhere to wash away the shame of the master because, from the white man's point of view, "The slave is nothing

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<sup>22</sup> Ephesians 6:5 reads, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." Galatians 5:1 reads, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." (*La Bible de Jérusalem*, 263, 271, my translation).

other than a commodity that morality does not therefore prevent from mistreating”<sup>23</sup> (Barroso-Fontanel 68). Such a family fragmentation was experienced by Douglass as he testifies: “My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant, before I knew her as my mother. It is common custom in Maryland from which I ran away, to part children with their mothers at a very early age” (Douglass 2). This issue is particularly dealt with in chapter ten and eleven of Jacobs’s narrative where Linda agrees to have sexual intercourse with her master while, as she bluntly says, “I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children. I had seen women sold, with his babies at the breast”<sup>24</sup> (Jacobs 61). Although she feels shame, guilt and remorse for her act, Linda justifies it by the fact that the slave really has no choice but to accept his master, otherwise the risk of being lynched for refusal to obey becomes higher. In such circumstances, it becomes clear that black women had no other way out, which led them to fragmentation:

The fragments are grains, granulations. Selecting singular cases and minor scenes is more important than any general consideration. The hidden, celestial or demonical background can be observed from the fragments. [...] The fragments still have to be extracted by a special act which precisely consists in writing”<sup>25</sup> (Deleuze, 1993, 77).

Linda’s story fits into Deleuze’s perception and reflects only a fragment of the whole prevailing negation of the female black subject which cannot be grasped as a whole unless one picks up singular and specific cases. These singular or minor fragments permit to unravel the whole pernicious system of gender-based or motherhood fragmentation and there were no such better ways than autobiographical slave narratives like Jacobs’s to achieve that goal. In a related vein, Mariame Wayne-Ly makes an outstanding comment:

In the assessment of black women writing, race, gender, and motherhood are essential in the shaping of Black women’s identity. It is then a tradition within African-American literary history to write about motherhood in order to evaluate, redefine or celebrate this critical aspect in a woman’s life. Black women writers then constantly relate stories that testify to the unique and painful experience of motherhood in the United States of America. As such, motherhood has always been the site of great challenges for slave women as reflected in the literary works of writers such as [...] Harriet Ann Jacobs. (Wayne-Ly, 2014, 189)

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<sup>23</sup> « L’esclave n’est rien d’autre qu’une marchandise que la morale n’empêche donc pas de maltraiter. »

<sup>24</sup> Linda is the book’s protagonist and a pseudonym for the author. Linda begins life innocently, unaware of her enslaved state. In the face of betrayal and harassment at the hands of her white masters, she soon develops the knowledge, skills, and determination that she needs to defend herself. Linda is torn between a desire for personal freedom and a feeling of responsibility to her family, particularly her children (Sparknotes Editors, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> « Les fragments sont des grains, des granulations. Sélectionner les cas singuliers et les scènes mineures est plus important que toute considération d’ensemble. C’est dans les fragments qu’apparaît l’arrière-plan caché, céleste ou démoniaque [...]. Encore faut-il que les fragments soient extraits par un acte spécial qui consiste précisément dans l’écriture. »

In light of Wayne-Ly's comment, it can be said that Jacobs related to motherhood fragmentation induced by slavery. By piecing a few fragments from black women's sexual and emotional fragmentation to highlight the whole historical context in which Blacks' racial minoring takes place, Jacobs used her narrative to "extract fragments". As Barroso-Fontanel contends, "to this burden of racial minoring is added [...] for all Black American women, that of sexual minoring specific to patriarchy which confines women to the most liminal space of society"<sup>26</sup> (Barroso-Fontanel 13). This context is made clear by Jacobs's characterization of Linda. While the relationship with a white man results in the birth of a baby, Linda already anticipates the uncontrollable emotion that will follow the abduction of her baby and its subsequent selling to another master:

I thought to myself that I might perhaps never see my daughter, and I had a great desire she should look upon me, before she went, that she might take my image with her in her memory [...]. It was sorrow enough for her young heart to know that her mother was a victim of slavery, without seeing the wretched hiding place to which it had driven her. (Jacobs 155)

Even though Linda has got a strong sense of motherly love for her baby, she is fragmented between the love of a mother and the future of a child born as a slave, and dispossessed from birth, a child who will live without any personality or identity. Such a situation occurs because, as Wayne-Ly points out, "The slave system, as a social construction, was perilous to traditional African-American gender and maternal standards. [Black women were] facing both sexism and racism [...]" (Wayne-Ly, 2014, 201).

"Slavery distorts maternal ideal" (193) and the same situation takes place in *Uncle Tom's Children* where Big Boy's mother, who has a slave-like life, helplessly sees her child forced into exile following an incident with Jim, a white man. As a matter of fact, Big Boy and his comrades' breaking into Jim's swimming pool creates an incident where Jim is accidentally shot dead, which compels Big Boy to leave his parents for Chicago to escape lynching. Just before Big Boy's flight of no return, his mother "went to the stove and dumped the skillet of corn pone into her apron. She wrapped it, and unbuttoning Big Boy's overalls, pushed it into his bosom. Heres something fer yuh t eat; n pray, Big Boy, cause thas all anybody kin do now" (UTC, 40). In such a painful situation where the child is snatched from the mother at an early age, one can imagine all the mixed maternal love and pain when "his mother held him closely, pressing him to her bosom" (UTC, 36).

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<sup>26</sup> « A ce fardeau de la minoration raciale s'ajoute pour [...] toutes les femmes noires américaines, celui de la minoration sexuelle propre au patriarcat qui cantonne les femmes dans l'espace le plus liminal de la société. »

For men, in addition to being banned from legal marriage, since they were considered as properties, family separation was experienced as a total loss of authority on one's children in the presence of the slave master. Such a situation was humiliating for black men who, believing they possessed their children, realized the obvious fact that they and their children were all the properties of the slave master and had no rights to each other in his presence. The following excerpt from Jacobs's narrative testifies this unbearable situation that male slaves tried to come to terms with:

One day, when his father and his mistress had happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said, "You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first." "You are *my* child," replied our father, "and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water." Poor Willie! He was now to learn his first lesson of obedience to a master. (Jacobs 9)

Such an incident highlights the ambiguous role a black man plays in his family, as he was the property of the master and resisted this situation. This scene raises an interesting debate over manhood and even the extent to which male slaves cared about their children but remained helpless before the institutional authority of their masters. In other words, Blacks' manhood and womanhood were simply effaced in the presence of the slave master who possessed the legal monopoly of moral and physical violence to make them obey.

The dispossession of Blacks manifested itself in the slave narratives not only through social, cultural, emotional and moral violence but also through physical violence. Morally speaking, black people were deprived of their social and cultural identity, through the unexpected separation with their family, while physical violence manifested itself through bodily abuse and starvation:

Mrs Hamilton used to sit in a large chair in the middle of the room with a heavy cowskin always by her side, and scarce an hour passed during the day but was marked by the blood of one of these slaves. The girls seldom passed without her saying, "Move faster black gip!" At the same time giving them a blow with the cowskin over their heads or shoulders, often drawing the blood. She would then say, "Take that you black gip!" continuing, "If you don't move faster, I will move you!" Added to the cruel lashings to which these slaves were subjected, they were kept nearly half-starved. (Douglass 31)

As can be felt, violence, be it physical and/or psychological, was a favorite means used by the slave master or mistress to increase obedience and production just as Mrs. Hamilton applies it to Mary, her slave. This type of violence is called "stimulation violence which refers to that used during work to increase productivity" (Yale 29). Another objective of inflicting physical

violence was to keep the slave permanently intimidated so as to make sure he/she was obedient and submitted to his/her master and to kill in him/her any temptation of reluctance or rebellion. Wright himself was beaten in his own family and intimidated by Whites respectively to be obedient to family code of conduct and Jim Crow laws. To keep slaves from rebelling against slavery, it became important to keep them from remembering. Equiano countered this situation despite the various attempts to call into question the credibility of his writing and of slave narratives in general.

It is important to explain the reasons why slave narratives triggered controversy. The basic dispute laid on whether slave narrative writers really witnessed what they told in their autobiographies. It should be noted, however, that these controversies took place in a context of memory competition wherein the presence of memory and its marginalization cannot be discarded:

Black historians aside, American history, almost universally, was written as if blacks did not exist and their experience was of no consequence. It was as if Black Americans had no word, thought, or act historians need take into account. This was more than overnight or accident. White historians shared the view of the general white public- the view of the Founders-that black people did not exist in the world that mattered. (Huggins xvii-xviii)

Indeed, the issue around this memorial question is all about knowing whether dispossessed subjects still possess memory and what role the witness plays in the permanence of this memory. Memory is to make present what is absent, what has disappeared; it is a form of representation to make present what has disappeared to console us (Foessel, 2018). Normally, as Foessel (2018) suggests, memory is a safe that belongs to us, since no one can take away from us what we experienced in the past. When we are suffering from an absence, at least it is possible for us to relate to the past as it happened (*ibid*). When we lose someone or something that is dear to us, we can repossess him/it by remembering his/its qualities and no one can take that memory away from us (*ibid*). However, when an event occurs, there is a conflict that is created between those who were victims and those who were the actors. Each group tries to constitute a collective memory which enables to give an identity to this group (Rouso, 2018). In reality, collective memory is a set of cohesive accounts of events (*ibid*), and this is what slave narratives attempt to do and what Wright, as a modern black artist, perpetuated through *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.

Even though Equiano, Douglass, Jacobs and Wright may not have experienced everything they wrote in their autobiographies, they re-appropriated the silenced memories of the dispossessed Blacks in order to express them in a world of semantic memory competitions.

Semantic memory is the meaning or interpretation that people make of the past (Ricœur, 1999). One can cite, among others, the semantic memory of slavery and colonization which engages the witnesses or the writers of these historical facts in a semantic memory competition (Ricœur, 1999). The proponents would remember and write about slavery and colonization in totally different ways from those who were the victims of these events. One can legitimately wonder whether slave narrative writers like Equiano, Douglass and Jacobs and even Wright were not plunged into this competition and took the risk of altering the true memory of slavery. In other words, did Equiano, Douglass, Jacobs and Wright witness the events they tell in their autobiographies? If not, then the problem of the reliability of collective memory that they intended to establish arises.

Indeed, according to Ricœur (1999), the question of memory representation is problematic, even with the one who has been a witness. Since the events now belong to anteriority, a witness is needed to make present the absent which is the past event. However, since the past event is not present, the witness must make use of representations such as writing to show the absent past in the present. This representation can be dented by phenomenological factors such as emotions, hallucination, déjà-vu, or forgetfulness. But if the witness encounters difficulties in showing the past in the present, how can someone who was not an eyewitness represent these events in written forms without dispossessing them of certain realities and, by extension, dispossessing the oppressed people of some parts of their individual and collective memories?

In the context of dispossessed Blacks, many of the witnesses of dispossession were silent certainly due to the fear of oppression. As a minority, their history was simply thrown as useless fragments into the margins of American History. Those who expressed themselves mostly did it in spoken words (oral tradition) due to their illiteracy and subsequent inability to materialize their memories in writing, which loomed the risk of forgetfulness and disappearance of these memories throughout time (Ricœur, 1999). It is certainly the risk of the spoken word passing away that gave some scholars like Jacques Derrida a tendency to prefer logocentrism (writing) to phonocentrism (speaking), because the former supplements the latter and gives it presence:

The supplement [writing] adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *technè*, image, representation, convention, etc, which come as supplements to nature [speaking] and are rich with this entire cumulating function. (Derrida, 1967, 144-145)

From a Derridean point of view, logocentrism is better than phonocentrism because the former is the word written. And once the word is written, it protects the presence that the spoken word cannot protect (Derrida, 1976, 145). In other words, writing is a supplement which permits past abstract notions as memory to become concrete and conservable. Having said that, it can be suggested that Equiano and Douglass, through their writings, gave presence to black memories and made them concrete, conservable and, so to speak, unforgettable. Put otherwise, Equiano and Douglass dispossessed Blacks of their silent individual memories to give them back an expressive and unforgettable collective memory through writing.

Even if Equiano's account of the Middle Passage may raise questions about the credibility of his testimony, which could dispossess him of the value of his autobiography, one could, nevertheless, argue that his testimony is worth as much as that of another eyewitness, since he could, in fact, make his own the memory of others, of those who told him about their own journey. By making these individual memories his own and recounting them in his narrative, Equiano allowed slaves to escape the risk of dispossession of their collective memory with time or with the competing memories their former masters sought to impose on them. It is clear that slave narratives protected Blacks' collective memory from other narratives based on testimonies of their masters who certainly would not tell of slavery in the same way. One can agree that the oppressed and the oppressors did not have the same memories of oppression and if by chance they did, they surely did not express it the same way. So, by telling their own stories, dispossessed Blacks repossess their memories they cannot be dispossessed of. In a nutshell, memory dispossession is what threatens oppressed people and that is exactly what slave narratives protect in a context where white narratives about former slaves are filled with stereotypes.

In a sense, it can be understood that dispossession, from Ricœur's perspective, "is not limited to physical constraint" (Ricœur 103). Actually, the dispossession of physical bodies is only the symbolization of a more dangerous form of dispossession, namely that of the soul as already demonstrated earlier. In addition to physical constraint, the dominator needs to establish an ideology which is told in order to legitimize his power position and domination over others. In this respect, Ricœur makes a spectacular remark:

Even the tyrant needs a rhetorician, a sophist, to give voice to his enterprise of seduction and intimidation. The imposed narrative, thus, becomes the privileged instrument of this double operation. The added value that ideology adds to the credence offered by the governed in order to respond to the demand for legitimation raised by the governors itself presents a narrative texture: founding stories, stories of glory and humiliation nourish the government's speech of flattery and fear. It, thus, becomes possible to relate

blatant abuses of memory to the distorting effects arising from the phenomenal level of ideology<sup>27</sup>. (104)

Ricœur touches on an important point of non-physical or immaterial dispossession, namely the use of narratives to legitimize it in the collective memory of dominated people. The ideological propaganda of the Ku Klux Klan and that of the Red Shirts which followed the abolition of slavery aimed at imposing a slavery narrative in a way to maintain in the collective memory of Whites their superiority and legitimacy to dominate other minorities as Wright will demonstrate later in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.

Just like white supremacist groups, the white literary sphere produced stereotypical narratives of former slaves to impose on them a memory of themselves as inferior and dominated beings, a memory that Ricœur qualifies as “exercised memory or imposed memory” which is “institutionally, a taught memory [...] held as the founding events of community identity”<sup>28</sup> (104). Applied to the context of post-slavery dispossession in the United States, Jim Crow education can be viewed as a set of narratives ideologically and politically designed to perpetuate domination. This attempt at mnemonic dispossession manifested itself in literature and art such as the minstrels (which will be developed in another part) which are made up of a set of artistic practices perpetuating former slaves’ stereotypical narratives. These stereotypical accounts of Blacks certainly played a role in triggering the Harlem Renaissance which, among other goals, produced counter-narratives to change the collective memory of black people and to re-territorialize them in the process of building a multicultural American nation. Indeed, until the early 1920s, writings about Blacks usually gave stereotypical portraits of them which contrasted with their real feelings and appeared as a way of dispossessing them of their identity and memory. With the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance, black culture made its way into the American literary sphere to the point of modernizing it and bringing to light black cultural traits which had been underestimated so far, not to say omitted.

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<sup>27</sup> « Même le tyran a besoin d’un rhéteur, d’un sophiste, pour donner un relais de parole à son entreprise de séduction et d’intimidation. Le récit imposé devient ainsi l’instrument privilégié de cette double opération. La plus-value que l’idéologie ajoute à la créance offerte par les gouvernés en vue de répondre à la revendication de légitimation élevée par les gouvernants présente elle-même une texture narrative : récits de fondation, récits de gloire et d’humiliation nourrissent le discours de la flatterie et de la peur. Il devient ainsi possible de rattacher les abus exprès de la mémoire aux effets de distorsion relevant du niveau phénoménal de l’idéologie. »

<sup>28</sup> Paul Ricœur qualifie de « mémoire exercée ou mémoire imposée » qui est « au plan institutionnel, une mémoire enseignée [...] tenues comme événements fondateurs de l’identité commune. »



## 2. The Harlem School of Writing against Dispossession

The 1920s marked a turning point for the beginning of the Harlem cultural renaissance. In fact, the crudeness of Jim Crow laws in the South forced massive displacements of Black Americans to the North where efforts were being made to transform the states from rural into city life. In the 1920s, “approximately half a million African Americans depart[ed] the farmlands and towns of the South for the industrial centers of the North” (Letwin 128) which experienced the advent of rapid urbanization and offered Blacks more job opportunities in buildings, industries and railroads construction. However, once in northern industrial cities, expectations were not met as hoped by the migrants as they largely remained in the margin of a yet rapidly industrializing city<sup>29</sup>. Aware of the black plight, black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson and Marcus Garvey welcomed newcomers to New York City and gave them a voice in tribunes such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League (NUL) and the New Negro Movement (NNM). They also launched journals: *The Crisis* (1910), *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (1923), and *The Chicago Defender* (1905), to inform the black community and make propaganda possible. These journals were very influential and the most read by Blacks, particularly *The Chicago Defender* during the first war. They all enabled to express black racial pride, to advocate for the recognition of African American identity and shaped new ideas on racial and social belongings.

Black journals encouraged dispossessed Blacks in the South to leave for the North and, at the same time, they served as a tribune for educated black Southerners to tell their horrendous stories in the South with a view to raising self-awakening. However, it is believed that economic incentives were the most plausible reasons which accounted for such a huge migration of Blacks to Chicago but once there, they soon realized that the major group still stood in the center of white collar business. As a matter of fact, while “occupational segregation in southern towns and cities concentrate[ed] male workers into unskilled jobs and female workers into domestic

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<sup>29</sup> The Great Migration was largely provoked by dire living conditions and lack of future prospects in the Great South of the United States. These dire conditions included, according to Gottlieb (1987) and Grossman (1989), poverty, racial violence, political exclusion, poor education and the free of charge exploitation of African American labor. Nevertheless, Gottlieb and Grossman both put a damper, warning that the flight from south to north did not guarantee and achieve an accomplished life dream caressed by the migrants, since once in the North, material and social status possession was limited. Migrants working in industries were forced into the lowest social ladder (Gottlieb 1987; Grossman 1989). For more on the Great Migration, see Gottlieb, Peter, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916- 30* (1987), Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (1989).

service, these conditions [...] represent[ed] a powerful incentive for southern blacks to look for opportunity elsewhere” (Tolnay 214). Stewart Tolnay further contends that “oral histories recorded from elderly Blacks after the Great Migration reinforce the conclusion that economic motivations were instrumental in their migration decisions” (214). One editorial of *The Chicago Defender* corroborates: “On account of the war demands, the abnormal economic conditions in our industrial life are such that they afford us an opportunity to better our condition by leaving the South”<sup>30</sup> (Gunnar 914). Black journals expressed Blacks’ battles to draw attention to the ongoing dispossession provoked by Jim Crow laws.

Black magazines offered the opportunity to several young Blacks of various literary backgrounds to publish their creations as a response to their difficult socio-economic and socio-cultural situation. In this respect, young artists of the Harlem Renaissance such as Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer benefited from the support of *The Crisis* to produce literary works of high standards as required by editors Jessie Redmond Fausset and WEB Du Bois, an advocate for high or elitist culture<sup>31</sup>.

Because the elitist literature, however, promoted romanticism as a viable literary genre to fight against dispossession, other Blacks found it too passive and preferred a more pragmatic literary approach to the black plight, which gave birth to realism and subsequently, naturalism. Consequently, the younger artists decided to shift their style and re-territorialize in realistic or naturalistic writing which enabled them to tell as truly and naturally as possible their experience as Blacks in the American society. This new literary path were encouraged and financed by *The Opportunity* which organized artistic competitions to promote black culture and attract white patronage<sup>32</sup>. The journal’s support enabled artists such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston

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<sup>30</sup> The Great Migration was advertised and encouraged by *The Chicago Defender*, a black journal created in 1905, the basic objectives of which was to promote black culture and emancipation from social, political, and economic alienation. “The North [was] regarded as the “land of promise” and the black press, especially *The Chicago Defender*, exerted much effort in persuading blacks to abandon the South. *The Defender*’s involvement in the migration illustrated one role or function that the black press performed in black history” (Strotman 62).

<sup>31</sup> “Elitist culture” must be understood here as the cultural policy of these intellectuals to select and promote the best artists to the detriment of the masses following high intellectual standards. In his essay entitled “Talented Tenth,” WEB Du Bois articulated his vision of an elitist culture as he believed the ten black intellectuals could produce high standard works of art and help younger black artists to attain this high-standard cultural production that could compete with white artists to prove Blacks’ intellectual and artistic equality to Whites. For more details on Du Bois’s elitist culture, see Gatewood’s “W.E.B. Du Bois: Elitist as Racial Radical” (1994).

*The Crisis* was created in 1910 by the NAACP under the leadership of WEB Du Bois, “which was to become a very influential body in African-American affairs. Through its militant approach to racial affairs, it drew a great deal of attention from black and white Americans alike” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). “*The Crisis* was a huge success and by the end of its first decade had achieved a monthly circulation of 100,000 copies” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Created in 1923 with Charles S. Johnson as chief editor, *The Opportunity* belonged to the National Urban League and published from 1923 to 1949 with a visible impact on the life of Blacks and race relations. This journal advocated for sociological writings that were as close as possible to the social reality of men.

Hughes, Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown and Frank Frazier to be published and to become literary prizewinners and, meanwhile, to contribute significantly to the repossession of Black American collective memory. By repossessing their collective memory, they simply repossessed themselves or, one may say, they became self-possessed.

What started in Harlem as a simple movement became a black cultural mecca for the whole country, which allowed black political organizations, such as the NAACP, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as well as white associations, to raise funds and boost black art. To Fabre and Feith, “Harlem appeared as an antidote to black diasporic dispersion: people of African descent, who had been kept separate by a history beyond their control, were now able to unite again into a new entity” (Fabre, Feith 3). In other words, one can contend that the Harlem Renaissance was a springboard where various fragmented black identities came together and built up a collective and unique identity. By creating their own canon, black intellectuals attracted urban Whites who became active in the black cultural revival through their artistic patronage, publishing offers and money investments. This facilitated cross-cultural communication between Blacks and Whites, even though Nina Gifford perceives it as “a complex relationship that scholars continue to probe” (Gifford 6). Gifford’s remark is all the more interesting since “the influence of white patrons on black artists and writers constituted a bone of contention among Blacks” (Fabre, Feith 10). In fact, it is undeniable that white patronage of black artists triggered an opportunity for cross-racial interaction, Blacks’ recognition and support. Nevertheless, one should not lose sight of the fact that through such a patronage in a period of racial and cultural competition, there could be attempts to alienate Blacks’ artistry into white standards, therefore diverting it from its fundamental objectives and dispossessing it of its originality. To secure this originality, some artists such as Langston Hughes, “proposed an unprecedented and ‘revolutionary’ writing in the Deleuzian sense by experimenting with other forms of writing and moving away from the Anglo-Saxon and European cultural tradition”<sup>33</sup> (Dualé, 2016,1).

Because Blacks were victims of financial dispossession, could they really afford to produce their art without the financial support of Whites who held the means of production? In a sense, there was no need for black artists to refuse white patronage in light of the poor economic situation of the black community. Beside the importance of Whites as financial partners, their patronage was an opportunity to promote black culture and, so to speak, to move

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<sup>33</sup> « Hughes proposa une écriture sans précédent et « révolutionnaire » au sens deleuzien en expérimentant d’autres formes d’écriture et en s’éloignant de la tradition culturelle anglo-saxonne et européenne. »

black culture from neglect and marginalization to respect and recognition. As Nathan Huggins comments, “despite a history that had divided them [Blacks and Whites], art and culture would reform the brotherhood in a common humanity” (Huggins 54). Huggins considers that “Without the help and friendship of white men and publishers, there probably would have been little production of commercial black art in the 1920s” (51). On closer inspection, Huggins is not wrong as Kevin Ramsden reminds us that, “other leading lights of the Renaissance, like Zora Neale Hurston, Louise Thompson and Langston Hughes, all benefited greatly from white patronage” (Ramsden 59).

Nevertheless, it would be naïve to completely discard any risk of dispossessing black art of its originality through white patronage, as some important black figures like Marcus Garvey, Ralph D. Story and David Levering Lewis pointed out. The problem is that, in a context of cross-racial suspicion, white patronage began well for artistic creations but black artists gradually discovered that they were limited due to the restrictions proposed and imposed by white patrons. Marcus Garvey severely criticized those who accepted white patronage: “The white people have these Negroes to write the kind of stuff that they desire to feed their public with so that the Negro can still be considered as a monkey, or some imbecilic creature” (Garvey in Parascandola *et al.* 103). Ralph D. Story was a bit more moderate than Garvey and just worried about the lack of originality or identity that the requirements of the white patrons could take away from Blacks’ works of art. The problem, according to Story, is that “the patron will always ask for something that meets his needs” (Story Parascandola *et al.* 103).

The real issue lying behind the debate over white patronage during the Harlem Renaissance reverts, once again, to the issue of black memory. While Black American artists of the Harlem Renaissance intended to restore the memory of their community, they had difficulties in achieving that goal as they had to rely on white patronage. In other words, did and does the writer still possess memory when his writing is influenced by his patron? In a context where the Black American writer was alienated to his white patron’s subtle censorship, to borrow from Ricœur, the risk of “manipulated, hindered or abusively-guided memory” could not completely be ruled out (Ricœur 69-82), because the writer was/is made not to write his genuine memory but what was/is acceptable to the major group involved in his dispossession.

Notwithstanding all the conflicting debates over white patronage during the Harlem Renaissance, “an unprecedented outpouring of writing, music and visual arts began among African-American artists” (Fabre, Feith 7). The Harlem Renaissance can be seen as an artistic springboard for such black artists as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Lorraine Hansberry, to quote but a few, to display all their artistic talents not only to the black community

but also to the white one. And although Wright was critical of the movement, it served the critical impetus for him to shape his own protest novel genre. Art is highly important in representing human relationships and the Harlem Renaissance, as a cultural and artistic movement, enabled committed artists to emerge and create art which gave new hopes to Blacks in general. That is certainly why W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, the ‘godfathers’ of the movement, believed that “artistic successes could be counted on to foster pride among all African-Americans and prove their educated class to be the equal of the white educated class” (Gifford 6), a stance Wright will view as being too latent in terms of breaking the color line. Journals like NAACP’s *Crisis* offered publishing opportunities to young writers and granted them prizes and rewards, with the aim of making these productions a means of propaganda to uplift and educate the black race, which was a way of repossessing their dispossessed identity. Marcus Garvey’s UNIA also conducted a cultural program which sponsored musical performances and art exhibitions, and its *Negro World* published a number of writings by prominent black writers such as Claude McKay. “Garvey’s insistence on race pride and assertiveness ti[ed] in with Du Bois’s notion of art as propaganda” (Fabre, Feith 10), while Alain Locke was rather an advocate of literature for beauty in a classical genre, but both remained in the sphere of aesthetic or primitivism literature.

Primitivism literature is a model of aesthetic rejection of western capitalistic marginalization and domination of other cultures<sup>34</sup>. It is not designed to fight against western civilization or culture but rather to criticize and reject western invasive form of socio-cultural domination. As Robert A. Cole and Diane Isaacs sustain, primitivism literature is used “as a ‘therapeutic pursuit,’ part of a significant critique of essential weaknesses and injustices in Western civilization like materialism, scientific thinking, faith and progress, and colonialism” (Cole and Isaacs in McCabe 493). Primitivism literature was largely used during the Harlem Renaissance by black artists such as Du Bois and Claude McKay to denounce the pervasive

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<sup>34</sup> According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary Online, Primitivism is “a belief that simple forms and ideas are the most valuable, expressed as a philosophy or in art or literature.” In the artistic sphere, primitivism refers to the first works of art considered as intrinsically original and safe from the influence of modern arts. These primitive works exclusively described the beauty of nature, culture and civilization. However, with the rapid evolution of Western civilization, culture and art between the 19th and 20th centuries and the advent of naturalism, realism and pragmatism, the term “primitivism” was used to refer to old forms of Western arts and, above all, to non-Western ones which were regarded as exotic or unevolved arts. Nevertheless, in the 20th century, the originality of the so-called primitive arts fascinated Western artists such as Picasso and Matisse who promoted them. American art historian, Robert Goldwater, in his *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (1938), valued these forms of art while classifying them into various typological forms. The valorization of these so-called primitive non-Western arts, African art particularly, was also promoted by the “Talented Tenth” in order to denounce Western overwhelming ethnocentrism and to replace the Black subject and his/her culture.

social, economic, political and cultural domination of Whites over Blacks, a specific issue which Wright will address through *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Black Boy* and *Native Son*.

Inside the primitivist literary production, Du Bois went so far as to encourage artistic propaganda for black racial pride:

[...] All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (Du Bois in Gifford 159)

Du Bois's declaration is highly symbolic, as it signals the consolidation of literary struggle against racial domination. In fact, the 1920s was a period when literature was still territorialized according to white standards. Thus, a work of art could not be used as propaganda of any kind. For Du Bois, this was a two-tier rule, since white literature was filled with propaganda keeping white culture at the center to the detriment of black culture, while Blacks were asked to stick to pure romanticism. Even though Du Bois did not move far from romanticism as a dominant genre, he brought in some slight changes, moving from literature for delight to literature for propaganda in favor of black cultural repossession, which was closer to Wright's perception of art as an ideological tool. While Du Bois shifted from romanticism, one could legitimately wonder whether he did not, maybe unconsciously, fall into what Ricœur names the 'ideologization' of memory:

The 'ideologization' of memory is made possible by the resources of variation that the work of narrative setting offers. And since the characters in the story are intrigued at the same time as the story being told, the narrative setting helps to shape the identity of the protagonists of the action at the same time as the contours of the action itself [...]. It is more precisely the selective function of the narrative which offers manipulation the opportunity and the means of a cunning strategy which consists, from the outset, in a strategy of forgetting as much as of remembering<sup>35</sup>. (Ricœur 103)

Yet, when the narrative becomes pure ideology or propaganda, selective narrative occurs. It is a form of narrative which skips or keeps some parts of collective memory to serve ideology. In such circumstances, the authenticity of collective memory can be questioned and its credibility doubted. Wright appeared particularly aware of the risks that propaganda literature posed to

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<sup>35</sup> « L'idéologisation de la mémoire est rendue possible par les ressources de variation qu'offre le travail de configuration narrative. Et comme les personnages du récit sont mis en intrigue en même temps que l'histoire racontée, la configuration narrative contribue à modeler l'identité des protagonistes de l'action en même temps que les contours de l'action elle-même [...]. C'est plus précisément la fonction sélective du récit qui offre à la manipulation l'occasion et les moyens d'une stratégie rusée qui consiste d'emblée en une stratégie de l'oubli autant que de remémoration »

authentic black collective memory. That is the reason why he chose pragmatic literature, instead of propaganda literature, to describe the real life of Blacks as it happened in his lifetime; his aim being to trigger protest from the black community. This pattern is epitomized by Richard in *Black Boy* and by Bigger in *Native Son* whose portraits were written to trigger the reader's protest.

Going back to the younger generation of Harlem's artists, they did not share Du Bois's approach of repossessing black identity and racial pride. Such artists as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston disagreed with the too much elitist characteristics of Dubois's cultural propaganda. Langston Hughes particularly refused what Dualé terms "artificial academicism [as it was] unsuited to his creative process"<sup>36</sup> (Dualé, 2016, 13). Criticizing the elitist artistic model which sought to imitate white artistic standards, Zora Neale Hurston steadily maintains that "the real us is infinitely superior to the synthetic minstrel version, and once they have had a glimpse, the imitation is rapidly losing ground" (Hurston in Brown 6). Hurston and Langston Hughes always denounced Blacks' attempts to conform to white artistic standards to show Blacks and Whites were equal and, indeed, Hughes rebelled against these standards as he deplored in his "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

One of the most promising of the young Negro poet said to me once, 'I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,' meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet,' meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be a white poet;' meaning behind that, 'I would like to be white.' And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. (Hughes 31-32).

What Hughes deplored in the young Negro poet (Countee Cullen) was the rejection of his own identity as a black man and artist. Poetry as practiced in the United States was the creation of Whites and for Hughes, wanting to be a simple poet meant wanting to be white. The only way for a black person to be a great poet was to create a specific black poetry. To Hughes, black artists could not become great ones unless they drew from their own popular culture. In a word, Hughes protested against black artists who wanted to conform to white culture and literature. This form of protest surely caught Wright's attention as we know he found an interest in the popular sources of black culture which he considered the very roots of national culture, which brought him closer to Langston Hughes.

One of the very few Harlem Renaissance writers who earned Wright's sympathy was Langston Hughes, certainly because Hughes early understood the non-necessity of conforming

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<sup>36</sup> « Hughes refusa l'académisme artificiel et inadapté dans son processus de création. »

to the principles of elitist literature and was recognized by his own poetic style of protest. After moving away from the black elite, his writing style was mainly characterized by its proximity to elements of Black American popular culture such as jazz and blues from Black American folklore. Hughes's writing, to paraphrase Dualé (2016), asserted a Black American identity by reevaluating hidden aspects of their racial heritage. Drawing on his own racial heritage, Hughes engaged his writing in describing the simplicity of black lives, as is the case in *The Best of Simple*, and in fighting against racial segregation in the United States, artistically, socially and politically. Wright will bring this fight further through his Chicagoan sociological protest novel. Langston Hughes was a harbinger in the repossession of a genuinely Black American art and Wright followed in his footsteps. As artists were faced with fierce criticism questioning the originality of Harlem's artistic output, Hughes was one of the first artists to find the answer. His response was not confined to analytical clashes in newspapers or journals but went beyond the theoretical debate to materialize above all in concrete actions in the artistic field. In order to restore black artistic originality,

Hughes broke new ground in poetry when he began to write verse that incorporated how black people talked and the jazz and blues music they played. He led the way in harnessing the blues form in poetry with "The Weary Blues," which was written in 1923 and appeared in his 1926 collection "The Weary Blues." (Kettler, 2019)

Harlem writing school embraced a new quest of originality in its writing style, as Langston Hughes and later Wright did.

He [Hughes] experimented with other forms of writing and moved away from the Anglo-Saxon and European cultural tradition. Influenced by 'the Harlem School,' but aware that his creation had to go through a different mode of writing, Hughes imposed a new style by building his own writing on unifying principles and common strategies. Through a 'mixed writing,' Hughes succeeded in appropriating the dominant modes of expression and in restoring them with the tools of Black American culture. Hughes proposed unprecedented and 'revolutionary' writings in the Deleuzian sense of the word<sup>37</sup>. (Dualé, 2016, 1)

Even though Hughes was criticized by his peers for his revolutionary writing perspective, accusing him of siding with the white folks to produce a stereotypical caricature of Blacks, "Hughes believed in the worthiness of all black people to appear in art, no matter their social

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<sup>37</sup> « Il expérimenta aussi d'autres formes d'écriture en s'éloignant de la tradition culturelle anglo-saxonne et européenne. Influencé par 'l'école de Harlem,' mais conscient que sa création devait passer par une écriture différente, Hughes fut le garant d'un nouveau style en construisant sa propre écriture sur des principes fédérateurs et des stratégies communes. A travers une 'écriture métissée,' Hughes réussit à s'approprier les modes d'expression dominants et à les restituer avec les outils de la culture noire américaine. Hughes proposa une écriture sans précédent et 'révolutionnaire' au sens deleuzien du terme. »



status” (Kettler, 2019). Hughes permitted marginalized black people to be created anew and by doing so inspired other writers, like Wright or Baldwin, after him<sup>38</sup>.

The younger generation of Harlem artists such as Wright, resisted “manipulated memory,” as Ricoeur puts it, and advocated for artistic forms which mirrored Blacks’ reality in an objective way instead of diving into the cultural dream in which, through white-standardized cultural production, they thought to be equal to Whites. Claude McKay shared Wright’s philosophy and criticized Du Bois and Locke in asking them whether there “could be a more commendable prescription for the souls of colored Americans than the bitter black imitation of white life”<sup>39</sup> (McKay in Fabre, Feith 9). From McKay’s point of view, Blacks had to refrain from imitating Whites’ ways of life in every domain, most specifically in artistic creations. By showing the raw reality of their difficult living conditions, true self-awareness could emerge and lead Blacks into taking collective responsibility not only on cultural grounds but also on political ones to fight for true emancipation. Such an approach was vigorously pursued by Harlem Renaissance writers such as Hughes before being brought to the fore by Richard Wright all through his literary career. There is no gainsaying that the Harlem Renaissance was instrumental in triggering Black American self-esteem and self-worth. At least, the movement can be considered as the background of a committed writer such as Wright who will bring black art further and lead black identity and memory to definite recognition. The economic hardship provoked by the Great Depression negatively affected Blacks and Whites. The sole hope that the Harlem Renaissance had sparked among the black upper-class was significantly shattered by the Great Depression. As a result, the black cultural boom entered into a withering stage. While the Harlem Renaissance was on a downward slope and the neighborhood abandoned by a lot of residents, a huge number of Blacks moved to Chicago in the 1930s onwards to find a

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<sup>38</sup> In addition to his original artistic creation aimed at restoring cultural and artistic originality to the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes personally got involved in promoting the movement around the United States and outside. Following the artistic territorialization imposed by the supporters of “elitist literature” at *The Crisis*, he moved away from this magazine and collaborated with *Fire!* so as to promote a typically black artistic creation which was not subject to any censorship related to any form or content whatsoever.

<sup>39</sup> Having seen the ephemerality of the Harlem Renaissance, one could be tempted to side with McKay by asking further to know whether the movement really enabled Black Americans to repossess their lost cultural identity. Though it is no time to make the Harlem Renaissance’s trial here, it is worth raising the debate over its real impact on getting Black Americans out of social and cultural dispossession. Because of the strong influence that white patrons got on Harlem artists and the subtle censorships which occurred, it is legitimate for critics to doubt its efficacy. Levering Lewis and Nathan Huggins blamed it for failing in its objectives as one can analyze this period as “an American cultural and political context in which white hegemony was virtually unchallenged and in which public, Afro-American discourse was tolerable only when voiced through forms compatible with Whites’ image of acceptable Blacks” (Baker 581).

second chance there. Among them Richard Wright looked at Chicago as a place where he would develop his writing program.

### 3. The Chicagoan School: Wright's Writing Program

Wright arrived in Chicago in 1927 at a time when the former ambience of the Harlem Renaissance was fading away. He was a product of the Great Migration to Chicago which, henceforth, “symbolized the American Dream à l'état brut” (Saint-Arnaud 55). Wright's decision to move to Chicago was linked to the difficult socio-economic conditions of his family in the Deep South and the tougher ongoing racial segregation. In moving to Chicago, he hoped for more socio-economic opportunities and more artistic outlets to express his literary talent. Many Blacks, including Wright, once in Chicago, were astonished by the relative freedom in the city and were eager to settle there for a long time in order to fulfill their American dream.

Throughout the trip, he [Wright] felt the impression of a liberation as the signs proclaiming segregation disappeared. [...] The white people sat by his side without paying attention to him and the tension which seized him gradually subsided; racial fear was replaced by a kind of indifference, which soon weighed on him. For now, everything was new, attractive. [...] The newly arrived Black felt a toning sense of freedom: freedom to vote, to look for work anywhere, to sit at will in trams and parks, to be served in shops and cafés, to visit museums and libraries<sup>40</sup>. (Fabre, 1986, 68)

However, Fabre himself highlights that even though “the city was vast, full of resources [...], the promise of fulfillment it represented was accompanied by a feeling of precariousness and insecurity”<sup>41</sup> (68). Wright felt this bad omen as, at his first sight of Chicago, he “felt that this world, despite its massive look, was of dangerous fragility”<sup>42</sup> (67), a fragility which proved true on the racial ground and which can be perceived in his writing and more precisely in *Native Son*. In *American Hunger*, Wright himself accounts for his difficulties finding a regular and steady job and his subsequent suffering in Chicago: “When the time came for my appointment

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<sup>40</sup> « Tout au long du voyage, il avait ressenti l'impression d'une libération à mesure que disparaissaient les pancartes proclamant la ségrégation. [...] Les Blancs s'asseyaient à ses côtés sans prêter attention à lui et la tension qui le saisissait s'apaisait peu à peu ; la peur raciale était remplacée par une sorte d'indifférence, qui lui pèserait bientôt. [...] Le Noir récemment arrivé éprouvait une impression tonifiante de liberté : liberté de voter, de chercher du travail n'importe où, de s'asseoir à sa guise dans les tramways et dans les parcs, de se faire servir dans les magasins et les cafés, de fréquenter les musées et les bibliothèques. »

<sup>41</sup> « La ville était vaste, pleine de ressources, et, cependant, les promesses d'épanouissement qu'elle représentait s'accompagnaient d'un sentiment de précarité et d'insécurité. »

<sup>42</sup> « Je sentais que ce monde, en dépit de son allure massive, était d'une dangereuse fragilité. »

as a regular clerk, I was told that no appointments would be made for the time being. My hours of work dwindled. My paychecks grew small. Food became scarce at home” (AH, 29)<sup>43</sup>.

Though Blacks were accepted in industries as they represented valuable manpower, they were still segregated at work. Actually, Blacks had fled to Chicago to discover that segregation was universal in the United States<sup>44</sup>. Wright, as a migrant, learnt it at his expense since, after turning around Chicago to find a decent job, he was only offered one as a simple dishwasher in a restaurant:

He then got a job as a dishwasher in the north of the city, with a certain Mrs. Crooks, who had just opened a cafeteria on the ground floor of the Patricia hotel. [...] He was the only black employee. [...] Extremely aware of the danger that any relationship with a white woman once posed, Wright was slowly getting used to the forced intimacy of the kitchens<sup>45</sup>. (Fabre, 1986, 69)

Blacks’ dispossession was exacerbated by the Great Depression which led many poor black Chicagoans to be expelled from their houses following their incapacity to pay for the renting fees. Wright himself lost his job and his own family was obliged to move to a poor crumbling house in order to anticipate landlords’ expulsion. These precarious housing conditions appear in *Black Boy* as Richard testifies:

Finally, we could no longer pay the rent for our dingy flat. [...] Inability to rent forced us to move into a house perched atop high in a section of the town where flood waters came. [...] Again paying rent became a problem and we moved nearer the center of town, where I found a job in a pressing shop. [...] Yet again we moved, this time to the outskirts of town, near a school, I would take a sack and gather coal to heat our frame house, dodging in and out between the huge, black, puffing engines. (BB, 36, 94)

Refusing to idle away in unemployment, Wright reveals in *American Hunger* that his consolation could only be found in reading committed books such as Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives*, Mencken’s *Prejudices*, and Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (Fabre, 1986, 145).

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<sup>43</sup> “AH” is the abbreviation of *American Hunger*. From now on, all quotes from *American Hunger* will be referenced “AH” between parentheses.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the massive arrivals of Blacks who poured from the South into Chicago brought worries to white Chicagoans because of the rapid changes they noticed in their neighborhoods, just like New Yorkers and Harlemites felt in the early twentieth century. While some Whites remained in luxurious houses in the center of Chicago, they felt being invaded by Blacks despite their settling in the neighborhoods. Meanwhile, other Whites feared the immigrants would compete with them for jobs and housing, and as William M. Tuttle corroborates, “many [Whites], moreover, were blue-collar workers who lived in neighborhoods contiguous to the black belt and who felt threatened, politically and economically, by the ‘invading’ Negroes” (Tuttle 449). This feeling of threat resulted in race riots which were “the result of longstanding discord between white and black job competitors in the Chicago labor market” (Tuttle 449).

<sup>45</sup> « Il obtint ensuite un emploi de plongeur au nord de la ville, chez une certaine Mrs Crooks, qui venait d’ouvrir une cafeteria au rez-de-chaussée de l’hôtel Patricia. [...] Il était le seul employé noir. [...] Extrêmement conscient du danger que représentait naguère toute relation avec une Blanche, Wright s’accoutumait lentement à l’intimité forcée des cuisines. »

These readings deepened his sense of disappointment and protest which was strongly felt in his daily relationships with people in town. As Fabre reports, “without openly criticizing their quest for cheap pleasures, he [Wright] let his neighbors feel his deep rejection of their way of life, [and] made friends with very few comrades”<sup>46</sup> (70). Wright rather found shelter in reading, which, from his own words, became a passion for him: “I went to work but the mood of the book would not die; it lingered, coloring everything I saw, heard, and did. I now felt that I knew what the white men were feeling. [...] I forged more notes and my trips to the library became frequent. Reading grew into a passion” (*BB*, 273).

While Chicago was territorialized according to racial membership, that is to say Irish, Mexicans, Polish, White Americans and Blacks (Fabre, 1986, 69), Wright rather found his territory in reading and writing. He, therefore, endeavored to find a tribune to achieve his goal of reaching a wider audience with his committed writings, but “only succeeded in placing no more than one short story in the *Abbott’s Monthly Magazine*, recently founded by the director of *The Chicago Defender*<sup>47</sup>” (75). The pages of Wright’s short story in the *Abbot’s Monthly Magazine* already displayed some characteristics of what I define as the “Wrightean writing program”, as issues on the coexistence of natural and supernatural explanations of the black plight are raised in his plot (75). Though Wright initially drew in part from Edgard Allan Poe’s gothic style, he finally preferred approaching the black plight from a naturalistic perspective, contrary to most of his community members who usually found shelter in divine or supernatural explanations for their poor living conditions<sup>48</sup>.

Later, through *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, it became clear that Wright had found what he needed in writing books, namely how to write his deep feelings, emotions, and suffering in a realistic and pragmatic way to catch readers’ attention and awareness. This is made clear in *Black Boy* where Wright admits that his statements “stemmed from [his] knowledge of life as [he] lived, saw, felt, and suffered it in terms of dread, fear, hunger, terror, and loneliness” (*BB*,

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<sup>46</sup> « Sans critiquer ouvertement leur quête de plaisirs à bon marché, il laissait sentir à ses voisins son rejet profond de leur manière de vivre. Il s’était fait peu de camarades. »

<sup>47</sup> « Il parvint tout au plus à placer une nouvelle auprès d’*Abbott’s Monthly Magazine*, récemment fondé par le directeur du *Chicago Defender*. »

<sup>48</sup> Gothic fiction is a literary genre which combines fiction and horrors mostly in supernatural scenes. We usually come across gloomy and decaying settings such as haunted houses or castles with secret passages, trapdoors, mysterious architecture, supernatural beings or monsters such as ghosts, vampires, zombies and giants. The gothic works of art are also filled with heroes, intense emotion, sublime pleasure and extreme feeling with a lot of suspense. It originates in Medieval England with Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* (1764). It was not until the 19th century that this literary style gained wider recognition through writers such as Charles Dickens, William Thomas Beckford and Edgar Allan Poe. Jerry W. Ward and Robert J. Butler explain that Wright sometimes drew from Edgar Allan Poe’s gothic style in his early writing. “Similar to the gothic works of Edgar Allan Poe,” Ward and Butler wrote, “Wright is here [Eight Men] using another persistent gothic technique, a doubled or shadowed character who embodies the repressed or hidden side of the protagonist” (Ward, Butler 154).

127). Future events justified Wright as a visionary man since many Blacks discovered the power of culture, reading and writing in changing their living conditions and breaking the color line. Such writers as Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, and Richard Wright himself de-territorialized from the traditionally romantic path taken by some of their Harlem counterparts to embrace a naturalistic writing style where they realistically depict the life of the working class in overcrowded tenements and their struggles to find their way in their new Chicagoan territory<sup>49</sup>. This particularly was the case with Wright who embraced the protest novel genre in order to denounce the lingering black plight through a realistic depiction of their living conditions instead of romantic writing. Chicago, therefore, became the foundation place of Wright's writing program.

Just like Harlem, Chicago became the Promised Land for the majority of Southern Blacks who all dreamed of settling there after the collapse of the Harlem Renaissance<sup>50</sup>. Wright arrived with this mindset in Chicago as he was captivated by the city which represented for him a new hopeful territory for all the Blacks who had fled the South for the North. As Wright himself recognizes in *Black Boy*, "I headed north, full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity" (*BB*, 228), a new dignity he wanted to use for his writing project. Wright also expressed his wonder at the sight of the fundamental difference between Chicago, the dream city, and the countryside of the South:

Instead of corn and cotton field, muddy streets and shot gun shacks, I looked in amazement upon the vast stretches of steel and stone towering factories and wide straight streets thronged with trolley tracks and el'. Instead of the scent of magnolias, I smelt the stench of the stockyards and the odor of gas fumes. (Wright in Hricko 100)

Yet after this phase of wonder and comparisons between the new environment and the former one, Wright came across difficult situations in Chicago as white real estate companies adopted tough housing policies between 1925 and 1935 to keep Blacks out of white residential quarters<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Margaret Walker (1915-1998) was a poet and writer. She published notable works such as "For My People" (1942), which won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition, and *Jubilee* (1966).

Frank Marshall Davis (1905 –1987) was an African American journalist and poet. He wrote "Black Man's Verse" (1935), "I Am the American Negro" (1937), "Through Sepia Eyes" (1938) and many other poems.

<sup>50</sup> "In the eyes of millions of Negroes, the North had long been a haven of opportunity and justice. Many of those who came to the North did so to escape the sharp competition of southern white labor, to avoid persecution of petty officers of southern law and the persecution of the Southern press and to gain the long deemed right of franchise" (Wright in Hricko 99).

<sup>51</sup> Mary Szto explains that the white real estate companies established what she calls redlining practices. These practices consisted of defining areas reserved exclusively for Whites according to racist norms deriving from Jim Crow laws. Redlining was a pattern of discrimination (still in existence) in which financial institutions refused to make mortgage loans, regardless of the credit record of the applicant, on properties in specified areas because of alleged deteriorating conditions. Official redlining practices began in the 1930s during the Great Depression. A housing bubble and bust preceded the Great Depression. Before mortgage lending became affordable, only wealthy families could buy homes. Black people were, therefore, excluded because they made up the majority of the poor population.

(Szto 3-4). This policy, coupled with the mass arrival of Blacks from the South, caused a serious housing problem just as new comers to Harlem had already experienced. Wright disdainfully describes in *American Hunger* the black neighborhoods in the following words where signs of scarcity and lack can already be felt:

The black flat stretches of Chicago depressed me, mocked all my fantasies. Chicago seemed an unreal city whose mythical houses were built of slabs of black coal wreathed in palls of gray smoke, houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie. Flashes of steam showed intermittently on the wise horizon, gleaming translucently in the winter sun. The din of the city entered my consciousness, entered to remain for years to come. (*AH*, 1)

The hostility of white natives provoked interracial violence that certainly reminded Wright of his experiences in the South, all of which plunged black migrants into social and economic deprivation. Even if Wright succeeded in finding a better paid job in the Central Post Office, the working conditions carried the annoying distinction of being the worst in the United States (Fabre, 1986, 78). This situation ultimately convinced him that he had fled one insecurity to embrace another one, that is to say, he had escaped the violence of the southern towns to finally live in conditions in Chicago which were equivalent to those of the South. This bad experience influenced Wright in such a way that he portrayed his life in writing as exactly as possible, more particularly in *Native Son* and *American Hunger* which are mirrors of Wright's thought on Chicago and exemplify his realistic mode of writing and his adherence to the genre. The description of urban violence in Chicago can be perceived through Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, and through his friends robbing a shop, and Bigger himself becoming an urban murderer. Wright himself confirmed it was in Chicago he really began his realistic writing project inspired from Sociology. As he reports in *American Hunger*,

Working at nights, I spent my days in experimental writing, filling endless pages with stream-of-consciousness Negro dialect, trying to depict the dwellers of the Black Belt as I felt and saw them<sup>52</sup>. My reading in Sociology had enabled me to discern many strange types of Negro characters, to identify many modes of Negro behavior; and what moved me above all was the frequency of mental illness, that tragic toll that urban environment exacted of the black peasant. (*AH*, 26)

In reality, as can be understood from this extract, Wright worked at night and wrote at daytime. For sure, Wright liked writing, but the fact that he devoted his whole day to it indicates a way

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<sup>52</sup> The second phase of the Great Migration in the 1940s brought a significant number of Blacks from the South to Chicago. This massive arrival of Blacks worried native Whites who were wary of newcomers from the South. With the help of real estate companies, the majority of black new comers were directed to populate the south side of Chicago. The south side of the city became a black quarter, a place of high competition between immigrants looking for jobs and accommodation. Then, a chain of neighborhoods, which was predominantly occupied by Blacks, got established. This chain of neighborhoods was referred to as Chicago's Black Belt.

for him to chase away boredom or idleness provoked by his lack of alternatives during the day. He only had the opportunity to experience Chicago's professional atmosphere at night, suggesting that he lived in the city but was not really involved in all of its daytime urban fervor. In *Black Boy*, Wright posits that, "[he] had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western Civilization, [that he] somehow lived in it but not of it" (*BB*, 149), which is characteristic of the marginalization process of dispossessed subjects who are, in a Deleuzian sense, the outside of the territorial center (*l'en-dehors du centre*). In simpler terms, they are admitted inside the territory but kept on the periphery or the special margin. It is obvious that the presence of Chicago settings in many Wright's early novels shows that this city was a turning point and imposed itself as a place ripe for expressing a new form of writing, and a new school of thought characterized by the de-territorialization of the former aesthetic and flexible model of black writing and its re-territorialization in a more pragmatic and proactive model with a view to get closer to the center. Wright's *Native Son* and *American Hunger* exemplify Chicagoan naturalistic writing language, a type of language which served him in crafting the protest novel genre. The critic, Rosemary Hathaway, admits that "his work for the Federal Writers' Project in Chicago [was] a major influence on Wright's fiction" (Hathaway 91), which testifies Chicago's influence on his writings. It can even be admitted a "Chicago Renaissance, partly led by Wright, an important follow-up and radical revision of the aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s" (91) took place with him. Therefore, it becomes clear that Wright's passage in Chicago had significant impact on his life in general and his literary career in particular, since his migration and his experience of it guaranteed him a non-negligible impetus for shaping his protest writing against dispossession.

Wright's apprenticeship of professional writing really began in 1931 when he was invited to join the John Reed Club of Chicago where, through *The Left Front* magazine, he could practice writing, propose publications and benefit from literary exchanges with other writers of the same aspiration. Wright's closeness to *The Left Front* mainly came not only from the drawbacks of the Great Depression which had exacerbated his poverty but also, and above all, from his frustration with capitalism which failed to offer equal opportunity to black and white Americans. *The Left Front* was Wright's first real tribune, a concrete artistic territory, which allowed him to voice his grievances against the capitalistic system in the United States. His first publication in *The Left Front* was poetic fiction addressing issues related to laboring masses and the injustices they suffered in accordance with the editorial line of the magazine. Wright's early choice to embrace poetry was certainly due to the fact that the poem genre remained so far one of the best forms in which an artist could describe his own feelings,

fantasies, and vision of society. The early poems he published are “Everywhere Burning Waters Rise” (1934), “I Have Seen Black Hands” (1935), “Between the World and Me” (1935) and “We and the Streets” (1937).

The John Reed Club, which owned *The Left Front*, promoted proletarian writing committed to the exploited masses, which influenced Wright to take his first steps into engaged literature. In *American Hunger*, he expresses his satisfaction at having finally found a group that shared his feelings and ideals:

My attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole [...]. It seemed to me that here at last in the realm of revolutionary expression was where Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. (*AH*, 63)

Wright’s literary career was strongly influenced by the communist philosophy which advocated for protest against inequalities in society. As Wright’s words suggest, *The Left Front* stood as an opportunity for him to piece back together fragmented minorities and give them an identity in a home of constant revolutionary expression or, to borrow Deleuze’s term, to express their “revolutionary becoming.” This becoming already appears in his first poems denouncing the capitalistic system through figures of powerful poetic styles and calling for revolt against all forms of dispossession. For instance, in “I Have Seen Black Hands,” it can be read:

I am black and I have seen black hands, millions and millions of them—  
Reaching hesitantly out of days of slow death for the goods they had made, but the bosses warned that the goods were private and did not belong to them,  
And the black hands struck desperately out in defence of life and there was blood, but the enraged bosses decreed that this too was wrong,  
And the black hands felt the cold steel bars of the prison they had made, in despair tested their strength and found that they could neither bend nor break them, [...]  
I am black and I have seen black hands  
Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with white fists of  
white workers<sup>53</sup>. (“Black Hands,” 1935)

Here, Wright describes the unfairness of the capitalistic system as the workers are those who have the physical means of production but once the goods are produced, they are kept out of their reach. Should such a system linger on, Wright predicts the occurrence of the workers’ revolt and sees this revolt as universal and calls for a raceless revolt against the capitalistic system which makes Blacks as well as Whites suffer. Wright advocates for protest despite being aware of the torture or lynching that it can entail as he accounts:

[...] And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth  
into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.

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<sup>53</sup> The entire poem can be read in Appendix 2 entitled Wright’s Poems



My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my  
black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as  
they bound me to the sapling.  
And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from  
me in limp patches<sup>54</sup>. (“World and Me,” 1935)

It is made clear in this excerpt that protest or revolt results in physical torture or lynching. Yet since suffering is part of the struggle of the dispossessed subjects to put an end to their dire living conditions, Wright does not give up. On the contrary, his protest reaches its peak in his poem “Everywhere Burning Waters Rise” with such a heart-pounding angry mood:

[...] Sweep on, O red stream of molten anger!  
Surge and seethe like liquid lava  
into every nook and cranny of this greed-reared temple  
and blister the rotting walls with your hot cleansing breath!  
Lick and lap with your tongues of flame  
at its golden pillars of oppressive privilege,  
lick and lap until they melt,  
melt from the fury of your heat!<sup>55</sup> (“Burning Waters,” 1934)

In this poem, Wright appears to have lost his temper as he moves beyond simple protest to call the dispossessed subjects for concrete action so as to nip in the bud their oppressive environment. The whole poem could even lead the reader to believe that Wright was a fierce advocate of violence and, indeed, the poetic language he uses is so violent that one could be right to believe he was a violent man. Later in “We of the Street,” Wright recovers his temper as he just describes the plainness of his life and the difficulty of living in the street:

Streets are full of the scent of us—odors of onions drifting from doorways, effluvium of baby new-born downstairs, seeping smells of warm soap-suds—the streets are lush with the ferment of our living.

Our sea is water swirling in gutters; our lightning is the blue flame of an acetylene torch; billboards blossom with the colors of a billion flowers; we hear thunder when the “L” roars; our strip of sky is a dirty shirt.

We have grown used to nervous landscapes, chimney-broken horizons, and the sun dying between tenements; we have grown to love streets, the ways of streets; our bodies are hard like worn pavement<sup>56</sup>. (“We of the Street,” 1937)

Despite Wright’s recovering his temper, he still denounces dispossession because living in the street presupposes he is jobless and has no means to provide for his vital needs such as food, health and tenement. “We of the Street” is already an omen of Wright’s future novels such as *Native Son* and *Black Boy* wherein he accounts for his street life experience as a result

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<sup>54</sup> See Appendix 2: Wright’s Poems

<sup>55</sup> See Appendix 2: Wright’s Poems

<sup>56</sup> See Appendix 2: Wright’s Poems

of his family's incapacity to pay for renting fees. The reader is made to understand this in Richard's testimony: "Finally we could no longer pay for the rent for our dingy flat. [...] The street seems dangerous" (*BB*, 36). All these issues related to dispossession and protest or revolt, that Wright addresses in his early poems, stem from the influence of communism and its Marxist ideology that he had espoused in Chicago. Just as the Communist Party encouraged a Marxist-oriented writing denouncing the flaws of the capitalistic system, so did Wright in his early poems, in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*, suggesting the need for social reform in America to treat every social group on an equal footing. Emphasizing the influence of the Communist Party on Wright's naturalistic writing, Tolentino states, "communism represents a necessary stage in the reform of racial inequality and the emergence of African American consciousness" (Tolentino in Hricko 108).

In Chicago, Wright met writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Henry Louis Mencken and Langston Hughes who, through their writings, had made significant contributions to social change<sup>57</sup>. Regarding the influence of their writing in social and political affairs, Wright became aware that literature, instead of being only used as an instrument of delight or cultural propaganda as practiced by Harlem Renaissance writers, could be used for the social and political changes he aspired to. As Mary Hricko points out, the type of writing based on the pragmatic analysis of the reality of Blacks "spoke louder than the words of organizations such as the NAACP and organized church groups who did little to resolve the issues African Americans faced" (Hricko 109). The activities of these organizations or groups appeared less important to writers such as Wright who "understood firsthand the horrors of Jim Crow and other injustices that permeated the country at this time" (109), and intended to describe these raw realities in his works.

While the Great Depression lingered on, shadowing jobs all over the country, Wright lost his job at the Central Post Office. He managed to find a part-time job in a burial insurance company which required him to travel back to the South and collect the insurance fees. Meanwhile, the Communist Party leaders permanently organized anti-discrimination

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<sup>57</sup> Dreiser (1871-1945) was an American novelist and essayist. He was an advocate of literary naturalism. Among other themes, his novels explore the new social issues in America provoked by uprising industrialization. Dreiser's naturalism inspired many black writers such as Wright.

Mencken (1880-1956) was an American journalist, essayist, satirist, and cultural critic. He was possibly the most influential American literary critic in the 1920s, and he often used his criticism as a starting point to expose various American social and cultural weaknesses.

Langston Hughes (1901-1967) was an emblematic poet of the Harlem Renaissance movement who had a strong sense of racial pride. Through his poetry, novels, plays, and essays, he promoted the celebration of Black American culture through art inspired from Black American folklore's cultural elements such as blues, jazz and the vernacular.

campaigns which Wright regularly attended. The regular mentions of communist-oriented leaders during the speeches pushed Wright to read much on Joseph Stalin whose personality instilled in him, “a new way of looking upon lost and beaten peoples” (*AH*, 82), which strengthened his desire to become a revolutionary writer.

Later, Wright decided to abandon the sentimentality and imagery of poetry to embark on prose writing allowing him to describe in a realistic way Blacks’ living conditions, which paved the way for the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son*, and *American Hunger*. While Wright threw the debate over Chicagoan urban violence in *Native Son*, he did not forget his personal history which he intended to reexamine through his sociological approach, and which led him to the publication of *Black Boy*. In this novel, the plot is so close to reality that one could qualify it as a journalistic report instead of an autobiographical novel. Wright’s realistic depiction of facts is certainly linked to the influence of realism and naturalism as he admits in *Black Boy*: “all my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them” (*BB*, 274). Ultimately, it is clear that Chicago was the first ideological school which Wright attended. The precarious living conditions, coupled with the emergence of the Communist Party in Chicago, deeply influenced him. In Chicago, he acquired the strength of the sociological knowledge that he injected into novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son*, *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*. In Chicago, Wright’s literary philosophy became clear: to describe the reality of Blacks pragmatically without any conformism to the requirements of literature as practiced by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Thanks to his knowledge of the Chicagoan Sociology, Wright re-appropriated writing by adopting a revolutionary model to move from the margin to the center of the literary canon.

The Chicagoan sociological school of thought suggests that human behaviors are shaped by the social structures and physical environment rather than genetic and personal factors. The city is considered as a big microcosm in which all the individuals display all their feelings, passions and energies in an interactionist system. The Chicagoan Sociology was originally meant to study and see whether contemporary problems such as dispossession and oppression occurring in Chicago were not linked to urbanization and increasing social mobility (Owens 264-273; Cortese 235-254). Wright admitted that he did not know anything about his history, but once in contact with the Chicagoan Sociology, he found a way out of historical dispossession. In this respect, he admitted being strongly influenced by Chicagoan science while writing his fiction:

I ignored what my history was and it was not until I got in contact with science [Sociology] that I discovered some of the environmental dimensions which overwhelmed me with worries. I discovered the works accomplished by those who studied the Black Community, collecting facts about the life of its members, and I found that sincere art and honest science were not so distant from each other and could mutually enrich each other. The huge piles of collected facts at the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago provided me with my first concrete view of the forces which shaped the body as well as the mind of Blacks [...]. It is thanks to their [Chicagoan sociologists'] scientific facts that I was able to assimilate some inspiring elements which were precious to me in writing *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*<sup>58</sup>. (Wright in Saint-Arnaud 79-80)

According to Saint-Arnaud, Wright was particularly attracted by the Chicagoan sociological interactionism which he clarifies as follows:

Interactionism is an approach which consists in explaining society from the perspective of continuous sociological interaction processes, which analyzes social life as a process of continuous interaction between different ethnic groups brought into contact with each other in the new context of mass urban existence (in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, etc.), reacting in a more or less conflicting manner while influencing each other in this typical environment of advanced urban modernity<sup>59</sup>. (81)

One of the favorite research methods of Chicagoan Sociology is participative observation which consists in approaching sociological data both from outside and inside. Outside observation consists in analyzing social facts as a stranger and the inside one as a member of the society under study<sup>60</sup>. In *Black Boy*, Wright makes use of interactionism, including all its methodological techniques, to depict Blacks' dispossession in America. Chicago is portrayed as a setting of interracial tensions between Irish Americans, white Americans, and Black Americans, each racial group competing to take the upper hand on the other, just as interactionism explains. Wright firstly describes the city as an outsider before diving into it to explain what it feels like to be a member of one competing racial group as will be shown below. This narrative technique gave him a sincere, realistic and more objective understanding of race relations as it enabled him to view the racial issue entirely, namely both

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<sup>58</sup> « J'ignorais ce qu'était mon histoire et ce n'est que lorsque je suis entré en contact avec la science que j'ai découvert certaines des dimensions de l'environnement qui m'ont tant accablé. J'ai pris connaissance des œuvres accomplies par ceux qui étudiaient la communauté noire, amassant des faits à propos de la vie de ses membres, et j'ai trouvé que l'art sincère et la science honnête n'étaient pas éloignés l'un de l'autre et pouvaient s'enrichir mutuellement. Les piles énormes de faits collectées au département de sociologie à l'Université de Chicago m'ont fourni ma première vision concrète des forces qui ont modelé le corps ainsi que l'esprit des Noirs. [...] C'est grâce à leurs faits scientifiques que j'ai pu assimiler certains éléments inspirateurs qui m'ont été précieux pour écrire. »

<sup>59</sup> « L'interactionnisme est une approche consistant à expliquer la société sous l'angle de processus d'interactions continus sociologiques, qui analyse la vie sociale comme un processus d'interaction continus entre groupes ethniques différents mis en contact les uns avec les autres dans le nouveau contexte de l'existence urbaine de masse (à New York, Chicago, Philadelphie, Pittsburgh etc), réagissant de manière plus ou moins conflictuelle tout en s'influençant mutuellement dans cet environnement typique de la modernité urbaine avancée. »

<sup>60</sup> For more details, see Saint-Arnaud's *Roman Sociologique Américain* (2017).

from inside and outside. In *Black Boy*, Wright is in a position of participative actor when he depicts street life and its code of conduct: “It is Richard the gang man who, thanks to his special gift for words, captures the fluent style of the conversation. At the same time, it is Wright the sociologist who interprets it from a distance in order to better represent it”<sup>61</sup> (83) and, indeed, we are made to understand such an interactionist participation through a conversation between Richard and his mother:

‘Can I go and peep at the white folks?’ I asked my mother.

‘You keep quiet,’ she said.

‘But wouldn’t be wrong, would it?’

‘Will you keep still?’

‘But why can’t I?’

‘Quit talking foolishness!’

I had begun to notice that my mother became irritated when I questioned her about whites and blacks, and I could not quite understand it. I wanted to understand these two sets of people who live side by side and never touched, it seemed, except in violence. (*BB*, 55)

As can be noticed in the dialogue, Wright is an actor embodied in Richard, but once it ends, he gets out of Richard to analyze and provide the reader with the significance of the dialogue. In other words, the reader has the impression that Wright has the advantage of bilocation, which consists in staying outside the studied area as an analyst, while being inside the same studied area as Richard the actor or protagonist. It can be said that Wright plays the part of an actor in *Black Boy* and that of an observer in *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom’s Children*. Yet whether he approaches the issue of dispossession from outside or inside, the results are the same: the black community lives in the margin where life opportunities are narrower and more alienated, just as evidenced in *Black Boy*: “Although they [Blacks] lived in an America where in theory there existed equality of opportunity, they knew unerringly what to aspire to and what not to aspire to” (*BB*, 216). As a result, Wright decided to draw from the realistic Chicagoan Sociology to create a new specific literary genre specifically dedicated to protesting and resisting dispossession, which gave birth to his protest novel genre.

Wright firstly triggered the fury of Whites with the publication of his protest novel *Native Son* (1940) in which he had the nerve to summon Whites in order to make them admit segregation, which drew the acclaimed critic Irving Howe’s admiration of Wright for “being courageous enough to release the full weight of his anger” (Howe in Britt 3). Wright is bitterly critical of the white oppression on poor Blacks epitomized by Bigger Thomas, the protagonist

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<sup>61</sup> « C’est Richard le gang man qui, grâce à son talent spécial pour les mots, saisit le style fluide de la conversation. En même temps, c’est Wright le sociologue qui l’interprète à distance pour mieux la représenter. »

of *Native Son*. Yet it is not simply the portrayal of Bigger Thomas which caused him troubles. The height of white fury against him may result from one important scene in the novel: Bigger's killing of Mary Dalton, a white girl. Wright did not apologize for Bigger's crime and even considered Whites as the real criminals and, worse, he built a white character named Max to claim Bigger's innocence:

This man is different. [...] The complex forces of society have isolated here for us a symbol, a test symbol. The prejudices of men have stained this symbol, like a germ stained for examination under the microscope. The unremitting hate of men have given us a psychological distance that will enable us to see this tiny social symbol in relation to our whole sick social organism. [...] There is guilt in the rage that demands that this man's life be snuffed out quickly! [...] There is fear in the hate and impatience which impels the action of the mob congregated upon the street beyond that window! [...] Their feeling of guilt is as deep as that of the boy who sits here on trial today. (*NS*, 298, 300)

Max portrays Bigger's crime as a logical act since, for him, it is the race issue which has gathered the social conditions obliging all Blacks to be at permanent risk of finding themselves involved in criminal cases. Book three of *Native Son* is entitled « Fate » as if to suggest that Bigger has no control over his actions, which requires attenuating circumstances for him, and indeed, Bigger's own plea suggests it is society which urges him to kill:

Max, a guy gets tired of being told what he can do and can't do. You get a little job here and a little job there. You shine shoes, sweep streets, anything. [...] You don't make enough to live on. You don't know when you going to get fired. Pretty soon you get so you can't hope for nothing. You just keep moving all the time, doing what other folks say. You ain't a man no more. [...] They own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth. [...] They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. They are after you so hot and hard you can only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die. (*NS*, 277)

James Baldwin, despite criticizing the portrayal of Bigger as a stereotype rather than as a genuine character, admitted that “no American Negro exist[ed] who [did] not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull” (Baldwin in Howe 358). By refusing to condemn Bigger's crime in *Native Son*, Wright may be suspected of being a potentially violent man who uses subtle ways to call for murdering white people as a legitimate perspective<sup>62</sup>. All in all, Wright's style of protest writing against dispossession mainly stems from the Chicagoan school. Simply put, Chicago played a significant role in making of Wright the writer on dispossession.

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<sup>62</sup> Suspicion was certainly part of the motivating forces behind American officials' decision to put Wright under FBI surveillance, an attitude which strengthened his decision to leave America. Accounting for Wright's troubles with his home country, D. Gomez comments that Wright's professional success was consistently undermined by the U.S. government. The State Department, CIA, and FBI saw Wright's political philosophy as dangerous and his public appeal as a spokesman for colonized peoples a tool that the Soviet Union and China (particularly during the Korean War) were using to score points against the U.S. (Gomez 42).

## CHAPTER II: THE DISPOSSESSED WRI(GH)TING ON DISPOSSESSION

Wright's writing program was made of non-conformism to express and show dispossession that he personally experienced. However, if Wright chose to write against dispossession, it is because he was influenced by his social environment either in the private sphere or in the public one. Such a point of view is corroborated by the traditional historical approach of literature as the manifestation of the ongoing historical events of the author's period, including social, economic, political, cultural and literary trends. In perhaps radical words, "literature could never be interpreted to mean anything that history did not authorize it to mean" (Tyson 291). This infers that one cannot efficiently interpret Wright's writing on dispossession without considering the historical context in which he lived or, one may say, without considering Wright's personal story or experience. Such a suggestion is all the more credible as Wright's personal experience is strongly felt in his works, particularly in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy* which are under study here. In this respect, while strongly relying on the traditional historical approach to explore Wright's socio-literary background, this section will examine Wright as a dispossessed writer writing about dispossession. It will firstly be shown how Wright was compelled as a victim of deprivation before highlighting the significant role his own family's spirituality played in his situation of dispossessed being. The family, however, is only the primary dispossessing micro-environment in which Wright lived. The public sphere, as this section will finally demonstrate, also stood as an unbearable alienating environment which worsened Wright's conditions.

### 1. Wright: A Victim of Dispossession

Wright began his childhood in the South of the United States where racism against Blacks was raging. His parents were in a precarious situation wherein it was difficult to provide for three meals a day, forcing little Wright to bear a life punctuated by daily hunger. As if it were not enough, because of painful circumstances marked by "a life in a dilapidated wooden house, long days of toil, chronic debt"<sup>63</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 11), his parents could not build a peaceful

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<sup>63</sup> « La condition noire à l'époque relevait du féodal : habitat dans une maisonnette délabrée, longues journées de labeur, endettement chronique. »

household and his father became a drunkard who spent all his time fiddling with a lover outside. This prevented them from giving Wright the parental love that every child needs for social and emotional development. The social situation made everyone embittered in the family to such an extent that Wright was ill-treated not only by his father who had got eyes only for his lover, but also by his mother and grand-mother who exerted hellish pressure on him under the pretense of providing him with a good education. Yet, children need to experience appreciative feedback from their parents to satisfy their need for self-protection. If they are scolded or ill-treated by their own parents, they can view them as “bad” (Borg-Laufs 42-23). It will be remembered that Wright was traumatized by his mother for his having burned the curtain of the house, which was yet an expression of his loneliness as a child. In reality, Wright lived in the family but did not really feel part of it, and this is seen in *Native Son* through Bigger who “held toward them [his family members] an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain” (NS, 20). Wright suffered from poverty, hunger, coupled with multiple family restrictions and the burden of racism which are all forms of dispossession permeating the three novels of the analyzed corpus and can be particularly perceived in *Black Boy* and *Native Son* when the narrator says:

I wandered listlessly about the room, trying to think of something to do, dreading the return of my mother, resentful of being neglected. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly [...]. To Bigger and his kind, white people are really not white people; they are a sort of great natural force like a stormy sky looming over head, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s feet in the dark. (BB, 21; NS, 100)

As the excerpt suggests, stripped of food because of his family’s poverty, hunger had become so ubiquitous that Wright personified it as a human individual standing at his side and staring at him. While Wright personifies hunger, Bigger objectifies Whites as a sky looming over his head and threatening to crash him down. This further suggests that hunger and his oppressors can be resented interchangeably as they all make Wright and Bigger feel physically and psychologically destabilized.

Wright was finally fortunate enough to be enrolled in the Howe Institute at the age of seven (Fabre, 1986, 20). Even though he was an intelligent child, his shyness due to his traumatic childhood had a negative impact on his performance at school, as it “overwhelm[ed] him every time he ha[d] to write on the blackboard, read aloud, or just say his name”<sup>64</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 20). As Fabre (1986) points out, “this sudden silence and this inability to perform the

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<sup>64</sup> « Là, sa timidité l’accable chaque fois qu’il doit écrire au tableau noir, lire à haute voix, ou seulement dire son nom. »



simplest gestures before an audience became second nature”<sup>65</sup> (20). Wright’s family reality ended up inscribing in his subconscious that human relationships were defined by daily confrontations, hence his difficulties integrating into the school group manifested by verbal outrages and physical confrontations with his comrades, as one *Black Boy* scene testifies:

He [Richard’s schoolmate] was pushed again and I struck my right and caught him in the mouth. The crowd yelled, milled, surging so close that I could barely lift my arm to land a blow. When either of us tried to strike the other, we would be thrown off balance by the screaming boy. Every blow landed elicited shouts of delight. Knowing that if I did not win or make a good showing I would have to fight a new boy each day, I fought tigerishly, trying to leave a scar, seeking to draw blood as proof that I was not a coward, that I could take care of myself. (*BB*, 103)

All of this turmoil that Wright encountered at school, due to his diverging point of view on interpersonal relationships, ended up ejecting the shy but paradoxically brawny boy out of the education system. Dispossessed of higher education by a social build-up over which he had no control, he found himself very early on the street where he had to work to take care of his sick mother and his young brother Leon.

Street life was not a place of rest for Wright. On the contrary, it was a place where a group of dispossessed people met and where only individual tenacity ensured survival. Wright was close to begging on the street where nothing was given away. When he found himself at the door of a white woman, instead of showing pity, she decided to take his dog from him in exchange of an insignificant sum of money, an event we can read in *Black Boy*. “One afternoon,” young Richard says, “hunger haunted me so acutely that I decided to try and sell my dog Betsy [...]” (*BB*, 78). “I haven’t got a dollar. All I have is ninety-seven cents” (*BB*, 79), says the white woman in an attempt to buy his dog cheaper than what he expects. The only solution Wright’s mother found to alleviate his suffering and the burden of her sickness was to send him to an orphanage while both his parents were still alive. This was one of the most serious consequences of isolation for Wright who, from an early age, was deprived of family care and thus experienced psycho-social dispossession. Hence his attempt to escape from the orphanage house wherein, as a general rule, only children who had lost one or two parents were accepted. This lack and sense of despair can be both felt in *Black Boy* as the following episode shows:

Half sick and in despair, my mother made the rounds of charitable institutions, seeking help. She found an orphan home that agreed to assume the guidance of me and my

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<sup>65</sup> « Ce mutisme soudain et cette incapacité à exécuter les gestes les plus simples devant un auditoire deviendront une seconde nature. »

brother provided my mother worked and made small payments. [...] I decided that as soon as night came I would run away. [...] When I heard the dishes rattling the table, I opened the door and ran down the walk to the street. (*BB*, 36-39)

The orphanage is a highly symbolic metaphor used by Wright to show his own dispossession. Actually, though his parents were still alive, Wright used the orphanage scene to infer that they were dead for him. In a broader sense, the orphanage signifies that the whole minor social group is orphan in America, a land where minorities starve in the midst of plenty food. That is why even though Wright was later taken out from the orphanage house to join his family, the situation did not improve much as he continued to suffer the consequences of emotional and moral deprivation in his living environment until his adolescence:

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, [...] I used to mull over how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. (*BB*, 45)

Richard's testimony reveals, here, all the ambiguities surrounding Blacks' emotional and mental lives as they show tenderness in the face of a wicked environment, passion in the face of apathy, hope in the face of an oppressive social system, and joy inside a decaying social status. However, a deeper look into all these attitudes reveals they are the epitomes of Wright's own resilience to his hostile environment that he conveyed through his literary works. These literary personifications can be paralleled with what Cyrulnik (2015) calls "resilience literature".

As a teenager, Wright was resilient and believed he could finally gain independence to fight for his well-being and that of his mother. This desire, however, did not take into account the fact that the harmful effects of dispossession spared no age group in society. Poverty deprived him of school, and then plunged him into a precarious economic situation, all of which forced him to devote himself to menial works which could only provide daily bread but not the construction of any future whatsoever. These aspects are conveyed in *Black Boy* where Richard can be seen indulging in menial works:

My first job was carrying lunches to the men who worked in the roundhouse, for which I received twenty-five cents a week. When the men did not finish their lunches, I would salvage what few crumbs remained. Later I obtained a job in a small café carting wood in my arms to keep the big stove going and taking trays of food to passengers. (*BB*, 94)

Throughout his adolescence, Wright continued to be abused not only by his family members at home but also by Whites at work, which, therefore, compelled him to change from one job to another. He was obliged to say 'yes' when Whites told him to do so, to say 'no' when they

ordered him to, to say ‘Sir’ to Whites whereas no White showed him respect. He was even obliged to fight with a black comrade to satisfy the simple pleasure of white people. One day, for instance, a group of “young white people who had hitchhiked him threw him out of the moving car because he forgot to say ‘Sir’”<sup>66</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 36). All these events undoubtedly impacted Wright whose interest in equality and human relations had been nurtured by his family background and personal situations. All in all, they participated in his writing when it came to *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.

Wright was passionate about reading and writing, which were a launch pad for bringing about a quality change in his life in particular and that of Blacks in general. Even though he practiced self-teaching, as Douglass did, Wright was prevented from reading intellectual productions, forcing him to lie in order to get access to books in the library. Such a situation shows that despite the coming into force of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment abolishing human bondage and giving full citizenship to former slaves, dispossession was still rife in the United States in many other forms. From then on, Wright was ready to do anything to ensure his survival while continuing his literary self-education just like former slaves before him and Douglass in particular who taught himself how to read and write:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. And Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. [...] Mr. Auld found what was going on and forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful as well as unsafe to teach a slave to read. [...] Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. (Douglass 28-29)

It is clear from Douglass’s testimony that he is definitely forbidden to learn and read. The same educational poverty prevails against Wright either by the difficult socio-economic conditions or by his own family members as conveyed in *Black Boy*:

Though I was nearly nine years of age, I had not had a single, unbroken year of school, and I was not conscious of it. [...] Until I entered Jim Hill public school, I had but one year of unbroken study; with the exception of one year at church school, each time I had begun a school term something happened to disrupt me. [...] Granny had always burned the books I had brought into the house, branding them as worldly. (*BB*, 64, 135, 136, 142)

Faced with educational deficiency, Wright indulged in alcohol trafficking, theft and burglary in order to support himself. For instance, while in Jackson, he defrauded entry tickets as a ticket controller at the Alamo Theater, stole a revolver from a house and then robbed the

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<sup>66</sup> « Des jeunes blancs qui l’avaient pris en auto-stop l’ont jeté hors de la voiture en mouvement parce qu’il avait oublié de dire « Monsieur » ».

Jackson College store to take out cans. Despite being aware of the unlawfulness of these actions, Wright “felt morally free to do so, since the Whites, so to speak, had put him out of the laws because of his color”<sup>67</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 57). Wright did not escape from the consequences of dispossession such as poverty and violence until he became an adult, just as the reader can understand when reading *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*:

Ah couldn’t buy a boat nowhere, so Ah ups n steals a boat when nobody wuz lookin. He swept the oars, remembering hearing tales of whole black families being killed because some relative had done something wrong. Bigger knew that they had nothing; they were so poor that they were depending upon public charity to eat. I brooded for a long time about the ceaseless beating of the “black” boy by the “white” people and the more questions I asked the more bewildering it all became. (*UTC* 59; *NS* 70, 233; *BB* 31)

Adulthood was Wright’s period of maturity. As he had a comprehensive view of Blacks’ difficult social situation in his country, Wright knew what he needed to expose. Writing was what he needed to represent the conditions and circumstances of dispossession. The deprivation of his selfhood was indeed blatantly exposed in *Outsider*.

Wright’s representation of his own dispossession is acutely perceived in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Black Boy* and *The Outsider*. Indeed, Damon Cross, the protagonist of *The Outsider*, just like Wright, is faced with individual alienation in a conformist society which intends to dispossess him of his selfhood. Just like Wright, Damon is not only dispossessed as a black person but also as any individual wishing to enjoy a free sense of self. Even though critic Paul Gilroy insists that, “more than any other book of Wright’s, *The Outsider* elaborates a view of blackness and the relational ideologies of race and racism which support it” (Gilroy in Demirtürk 279), Wright stands by his guns: “my hero could have been of any race [...]. I have tried to render my sense of our contemporary living as I see it and feel” (Wright in Demirtürk 279). Although Damon is a black person, his main concern is not his racial status but his status as an individual in society.

Damon is faced with attempts to dispossess him of his individual freedom in favor of the collectivity, just as Wright himself was within his own family. Faced with his mother’s rigid religious principles who tries to teach him selflessness by asking him to “deny himself sometimes and not hurt others” (*The Outsider*, 28), Damon feels dispossessed of his selfhood and “instinctively chooses to love himself more than others” (Demirtürk 284). Wright also had the same experience with his grandmother who wanted to compel him to live her Adventist

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<sup>67</sup> « Il résolut donc de recourir au vol. Il se sentait libre, sur le plan moral, de le faire, puisque les Blancs l’avaient pour ainsi dire mis en dehors des lois à cause de sa couleur. »

values while he was determined to live according to his free will. Wright simply refused to cross out his individuality for the benefit of the collectivity. To escape more from individual dispossession by the collectivity, Wright behaved like his character Damon who took advantage of his fake death in a train accident “to kill his original identity [that was subject to dispossession], in order to reveal his second self so that he can operate in the domain of freedom” (Demirtürk 285). He is so attached to his new identity that he finally kills a person who recognizes him and threatens to reveal his true identity, that is his second one which he thinks guarantees him some more sense of self than the first one known to be alienating. Damon is portrayed by Wright much like himself as an individual who fights to get rid of social codes of conduct in order to repossess his own self by trying to live outside the norms of social entity, which is characteristic of the margin and of minor literature according to Deleuze.

Through Damon’s characterization, Wright points to his own dispossession and suggests that the individual should not be possessed by the collectivity. He should rather get rid of any forms of dispossession of his selfhood, because he is the sole builder of his essence by his own actions which should not be predetermined by society’s moral or ideological norms. Wright considered the individual as intrinsically unique and, therefore, as the master of his self, of his actions, his fate, values and of his views. In the American society, Wright was really between a rock and a hard place to such an extent that he decided to subordinate his writing to action and political commitment, which is once again characteristic of the margin as Deleuze (1975) points out that all minor literature is political. Wright’s sense of alienation stemmed not only from white oppression but also from his own community’s spiritual oppression which tore him between two worlds or, put differently, between the margin and the center.

## **2. The Oppressive Influence of Spirituality and its Wrightean Expression**

While community influences individuals’ behaviors, family constitutes a form of micro-community which determines an individual’s present and future behavior. Family environment provides the first educational framework of the individual. The family is responsible for the individual’s primary socialization. “The family, the father and mother,” according to Clàudia and Dias, “are the fundamental basis for the children’s healthy development, because it is among its family that the child feels secure, loved, and protected” (Claudia, Diaz 704). The child’s secondary socialization heavily depends on his primary one as it is the latter which sets the basis for the former to be completed. As Claudia and Dias assert, “family role has the

primary agent of socialization, because it is within the family that children begin to acquire values, attitudes, and behaviors accepted by society” (688). Wright’s family values were based on Christian spirituality that all the family members intended to exact on him notwithstanding his reluctance to metaphysical control over his life. By dint of wanting to impose their Christian spirituality on Wright, their faith became an oppressive force which transgressed his selfhood.

In theory, religion is a factor of social cohesion and common action. In practice, however, it is often used as an instrument for violence. This violence can take many facets ranging from physical, emotional and moral to psychological ones. In the case of Wright’s family, even if it was part of a logic of allowing believers to meditate and have a common experience on how to relate to God and to others, religion was used to dispossess Wright of his physical, moral, emotional and psychological wholeness. Religion was perceived by Wright as a tool to achieve the goal of dispossession not only through music (the Spirituals) but also through religious leaders and devout practitioners like his aunt Granny. Although dispossession was an immutable reality in Wright’s life, the key elements of religion were used in a way that consciously or unconsciously contributed to suppress any hint of his resistance or revolt against the harsh living conditions. Wright subtly represents this reality in *Native Son* through Bigger’s characterization. Just like Wright, Bigger thinks and strives to preserve his sense of wholeness, acquired after Mary’s murder, but religious music penetrates his ears, then intrudes into his mind to convince him to surrender and, so to speak, to give up his sense of rediscovered wholeness:

The singing of the church vibrated through him, suffusing him a mood of sensitive sorrow. He tried not to listen but it seeped into his feeling, whispering of another way of life and death, coaxing him to lie down and sleep and let them come and get him, urging him to believe that all life was a sorrow that had to be accepted [...]. The music sang of surrender, resignation. *Steal away, steal away, steal away home to Jesus* [...]. The singing filled his ears; it was complete, self-contained, and it mocked his fears and loneliness, his deep yearning for a sense of wholeness. (NS, 205)

While one would logically expect religious music to help solve the problems of Blacks, on the contrary, it simply teaches them to endure their dispossession and wait for God to come to their rescue. Worse, it mocks people’s fears, loneliness and quest for wholeness, which means religion does not care much about their deep feelings and quests for self-awareness. This argument is in line with Jeffrey Jorvath who suggests that religious music such as the Negro Spirituals motivates those who have nothing and are deprived of anything “to endure, convincing them that deliverance will come. But because this implies patience and self-violence, many, including Wright, became impatient. Tired of simply longing for a truer, better world, they instead desired to achieve one for themselves” (Jorvath 5-6).

Whenever Wright tried to find a certain psychological stability allowing him to face his problems in the real world, it is understood that an element of religion intervened in violation of this stability to sow doubt and, thus, prevent any inclination to revolt. It is the case with Bigger in *Native Son*, when he finds himself in the hands of those who took away his freedom and tries to restore his psychological strength against all odds. The religious leader then intervenes and violates his psychological stability by wanting Bigger to deny himself and accept he is just a poor sinner who violated social and divine laws by killing two innocent people. As soon as Reverend Hammond arrives, he lays his cards on the table: “Lawd Jesus, turn yo’ eyes and look inter the heart of this po’ sinner! Po’ it out fo’ this sinner boy who stan’s in deep need of it” (*NS*, 223). Such a prayer shakes Bigger’s psychic and emotional stability as the rest of the narrative shows:

Bigger stared unblinkingly at the white wall before him as the preacher’s words registered in his consciousness. He knew without listening what they meant; it was the old voice of his mother telling of suffering, of hope, of love beyond this world. And he loathed it because it made him feel as condemned and guilty as the voice of those who hated him [...]. As the preacher talked there appeared before him a vast black silent void and the images of the preacher swam in that void, grew large and powerful, familiar images which his mother had given him when he was a child at her knee, images which in turn aroused impulses long dormant, impulses that he had suppressed and sought to shun from his life. (*NS*, 223-224)

While Bigger, just like Wright, intends to achieve happiness on earth, his family spiritual discourse violates this goal and wants him to happily accept deprivation on earth in order to enjoy possession in the afterlife. To fully enjoy the realities of this afterlife, however, those who are dispossessed must first struggle to confess their sins against those who led them to this situation. In concrete terms, Bigger, just as people like him, must regret killing Mary and embrace a life of repentance while accepting his death sentence in court, which would constitute an act of self-violence because it is precisely such ideas that Bigger “had suppressed and sought to shun from his life” (*NS*, 224). Bigger’s case really epitomizes Wright’s own experience as he shows it through the kitten scene in *Black Boy*: “Shut your eyes and repeat after, she [Ella] said. I closed my eyes tightly, my hands clinging to hers. ‘Dear God, our Father, forgive me, for I knew not what I was doing,’ I repeated. ‘And save my poor life, even though I did not spare the life of the kitten’” (*BB*, 20). This event occurs following Wright’s killing of the kitten. After bullying Wright, his mother obliges him to move into the darkness and bury the kitten which, yet, symbolizes his father’s denial of his basic need to play as a child. Ella’s religious extremism even leads her to compel Wright to ask God to forgive his crime.

Religious extremism is often a hallmark of some characters in Wright's works of art as it happened in his real life environment. When the individual is in this state of mind, he tends to perceive the less devout or the unbeliever members of his family as a hindrance to the will of God, which often leads to violence against them. In the same vein, Exline *et al.* explain that "disagreements on religious issues with close others or religious institutions can also be a source of conflict. Given the psychological potency of seeing God as close and trustworthy, less benign views of God should be associated with negative emotions" (Exline *et al.* 1482-1483). Wright's portrayal of Ella and especially Granny in *Black Boy* is a perfect illustration of this attitude of the extremist believer towards the non-believer. Ella and Granny exert psychological violence on Wright, the former forcing him to ask God for forgiveness for having killed a kitten, the latter tormenting him into worshipping her God as the narrative reveals: "Granny made it imperative, however, that I attend certain all-night ritualistic prayer meetings. The daily prayers were a torment and my knees became sore from kneeling so long and often" (*BB*, 123). The height of family religious extremism on Wright lay in the fact that he even suffered from physical violence in the name of the Adventist values that Granny and Addie want to transmit him, values that he criticized just as Rodwell Makombe comments:

Adventist doctrine functions as a repressive discourse that colludes with racist America to further confine and silence the Black child [...]. Although authoritarian religious practices are found even in non-racial societies, the repressive nature of the Adventist doctrine in a society that is already racially polarized worsens Richard's situation. (Makombe 225)

Family spirituality has become an accomplice of the oppressive social system to deny Wright his individuality and, so to speak, to dispossess him of his freedom to choose without being at risk of any violence against him.

What appears contradictory in the Adventist doctrine is that when the advocates of religion, who are supposed to be peaceful, are faced with dispossession, violence is sometimes requested from God to punish the dispossessors. For instance, in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Reverend Taylor uses religion to curse and ask God to destroy his white enemies. Reverend Taylor finds himself in such a situation where he himself, who is supposed to advocate for non-violence, falls into invoking the violence of his God on his dispossessors. Unlike Reverend Hammond who asks Bigger to apologize for having assaulted to death two young girls, Mary and Bessie, Reverend Taylor does not ask his tormentors to repent. Rather, he invokes the wrath of God on them as a revenge for having molested him in the bush: "Like a pillar of fire, tear it down like ol Samson tore the temple down" (*UTC*, 167). However, despite his real contempt for the dispossessors, Reverend Taylor initially practices self-violence by refusing to participate



publicly in a march organized by the young Communists to end the dispossession of food, because of, according to James Giles, “his religious orthodoxy and fear of white establishment” (Giles 262).

In this context, Wright points out the negative role that religion sometimes plays. In fact, the individuals’ commitment to defend their rights can be hampered by religious or spiritual considerations which each time recall them their duties without, however, encouraging them to defend their dispossessed rights dearly, which Tommie Shelby demonstrates in his analysis of “Bright and Morning Star”:

Wright describes Sue as having drawn strength and solace from the Christian religion in the past. Her son, however, had urged her to reject this outlook, which they believed counseled accommodation to injustice [...]. And Sue had come, reluctantly, to accept this new vision [to the detriment of] her previous commitment to spiritual salvation through faith in Christ. (Shelby 519)

Shelby suggests that, in the past, Sue found shelter in religion to accommodate with social injustice until her son tries to prove her that instead of her commitment to spiritual salvation, it is active class solidarity which can bring her out of dispossession. Nevertheless, it can be seen that even though she espouses this new perspective, she does so reluctantly because of the persistence of religious beliefs in her which neglect material possession.

In a world where the unflinching search for material possession leads some stronger people to dispossess weaker ones in order to increase their level of possession, religious considerations do not allow to rebalance things in terms of equity between individuals. Religion drags the dispossessed subjects into accommodating dispossession as already shown by Tommie Shelby and corroborated by Bigger who sees religious call as a commitment to “laying his head upon a pillow of humility and giving up his hope of living in the world” (*NS*, 254). Thus, religion loses, in Bigger’s opinion, its potential as being able to trigger social change. From a Wrightean perspective, religion should be a fundamental element in the life of the black community. It has real potential in terms of making them aware of the harsh realities of life and the actions to be taken to deal with them. However, this potential is neither valued nor transformed into political force to curb dispossession. On the contrary, it remains passive in a sense that it does not advocate for action but passivity while waiting for the intervention of divine forces to restore those who are submitted to dispossession in their rights. That is why religion is the most tolerated subject among these people, because, from Yoshinobu Hakutani’s point of view, “[it was] a topic which did not require positive knowledge or self-assertion” (Hakutani 72). Yet, as long as there is no positive knowledge or self-assertion, it allows

individual believers being controlled in their daily lives by making them pray, sing and dance, hoping for a better life<sup>68</sup>.

For a pragmatic subject like Wright who no longer trusted religion, practicing it out of dispossession was a waste of time, and this is shown through Bigger's peremptory rejection of religion in *Native Son*. Asked about his family's spirituality by Max, his lawyer, Bigger is straight to the point: "I didn't like it [religion]. There was nothing in it. Aw all they did was sing and shout and pray all the time. And it didn't get 'em nothing. All the colored folks do that, but it don't get 'em nothing. The white folks got everything" (*NS*, 279). This scene is intended to highlight irony, as Wright wants to show black people who were in the church all the time praying got nothing from their God while white folks who were probably less involved in the church got everything. In other words, churchgoers are happy with their dispossession at church and the dispossessors with their massive possession outside the church. This situation of control prevented Blacks from preying on their dispossessors.

To control and ensure the obedience of believers, Wright indicates that religion always brandishes the threat of God who would punish those who repay evil with evil or who row against the laws established by society, however unjust, and by God. Thus, there is no need for religious police to control the daily public or private actions of the individuals, since a permanent invisible, supernatural and ubiquitous being who watches everything has been set up in their consciousness. This function of the church is, according to Macombe, "ideological which seeks to control by exercising the power of the supernatural" (Makombe 298). It is confirmed by Wright in *Black Boy* through a dialogue between Richard and a young member of the church:

'Aren't you afraid of God?' He asked.  
'No why should I be? I've done nothing to Him.'  
'He's a jealous God,' he warned me.  
'I hope that he is a kind God,' I told him.  
'If you are kind to Him, He is a kind God,' the boy said,  
'But God will not look at you if you don't look at Him.'  
Wherever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or group to rule another in the name of God. (*BB*, 130)

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<sup>68</sup> For more details on how religion contributed to Black American dispossession, see also Ann. Trousdale's "Submission Theology for Black Americans: Religion and Social Action in Prize-Winning Children's Books About the Black Experience in America" (1990). Trousdale lays out the problematic double influence of religion on Black Americans. On the one hand, white theology calls Blacks for subservient role in American society; on the other hand, black theology calls for spiritual resistance to oppression instead of fighting through concrete actions. Whites did not particularly keep Blacks from growing spiritually according to their own theology as long as this theology did not urge to concrete actions against the racial status quo imposed by Whites.

It is clear from this excerpt that Wright does not believe in the existence of supernatural power which will deal with non-submissive individuals but rather in the fact that men have imagined this power in order to control human behavior and make sure it complies with the rules of society. To achieve that goal, Wright suggests that well-targeted appalling sermons are used to move the sensitivity of churchgoers and control their minds, just as highlighted in *Black Boy*:

Granny was an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and I was compelled to make a pretense of worshiping her God, which was her exaction for my keep. The elders of her church expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, of seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of moon turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth, of a wooden staff being transformed into a serpent, of voices speaking out of clouds, of men walking upon water, of God riding whirlwinds, of water changing into wine, of the dead rising and living, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking; a salvation that teemed with fantastic beasts having multiple heads and horns and eyes and feet; sermons of statues possessing heads of gold, shoulders of silver, legs of brass, and feet of clay; a cosmic tale that began before time and ended with the clouds of the sky rolling away at the Second Coming of Christ; chronicles that concluded with the Armageddon; dramas thronged with all the billions of human beings who had ever lived or died as God judged the quick and the dead. (*BB*, 113)

Wright describes these appalling sermons just to show how much of an emotional impact they can have on listeners. Richard himself recognizes that “while listening to the vivid language of the sermons, [he] was pulled toward emotional belief” (*BB*, 113). However, as an enlightened and naturalistic individual just like Wright, “as soon as [he] went out of the church and saw the bright sunshine and felt the throbbing life of the people in the streets, [he] knew that none of it was true and that nothing would happen” (*BB*, 113). When such sermons fail to convince sensitive thinkers like Richard, other strategies are used to objectivize religious control over him.

To objectify religious control, religious leaders pose as the saviors of those who are oppressed by telling them stories like that of Moses who was chosen by the Creator to bring the oppressed people to a land of freedom, wealth and happiness. This is the case of Reverend Taylor in “Fire and Cloud,” from the perspective of whom,

God had spoken to him, a quiet, deep voice coming out of the black night; God had called him to preach his word, to spread it in the four corners of the earth, to save His black people. And he had obeyed God and had built a church on a rock which the very gates of Hell could not prevail against. Yes, he had been like Moses, leading his people out of wilderness into Promised Land. (*UTC*, 131)

It is clear that Reverend Taylor thinks he is a contemporary Moses and deems it his mission to save the oppressed and bring them to a land of promises<sup>69</sup>. While Reverend Taylor tries to convince his church members to be happy with their current situation until God shows them the way to go, Wright, through a certain dose of irony, makes his readers understand the land which is promised to the oppressed subjects is a land of submission, resignation, inaction and hunger. Wright's portrayal of Taylor and his religious stance makes the reader believe that the Black Church cannot stop individuals from being dispossessed. This is reality because there is no political dimension attached to it. And even if Taylor continues to believe that "the good Lawd gonna clean up this ol worl [world of dispossession] someday" (*UTC*, 131), he eventually faces the fact that his Mosesan mission "was giving way, crumbling in his hands, right before his heads. And everything he tried to find some way to stop it, he saw wide gray eyes behind icily white spectacles" (*UTC*, 132). Actually Taylor's messianic pretension fails because it lacks political dimension.

The political dimension Wright envisioned did not necessarily implied a commitment in a political party. Rather, he pointed to a concrete commitment in the community in order to put an end to or reduce the defects of society through awareness-raising and denunciation actions. The failure of religion, therefore, lies in its lack of political commitment to those who are oppressed. For Horvath, "this reality is addressed thematically in *Uncle Tom's Children* as the respective short stories demonstrate the necessity of fusing the political with the spiritual in order to affect social change and to achieve social justice" (Horvath13). Timothy Caron goes further suggesting that "each of the collection's stories demonstrates either the tragic consequences of life without a church committed to revolutionary politics, or the victorious results of a Christian praxis driven by a Marxist demand for social change" (Caron 46). In other words, religion is only important when used as a political tool working for social change in terms of relationship between the upper, middle and lower classes. If religion does not engage in politics in favor of those who have been deprived of everything or is against politics, it ends up encouraging political inaction by making the individual believe it is not his personal commitment which can change society but He who created him, that is, God. That is why Wright tries to prove in "Big Boy Leaves Home" that it is rather concerted, collective and

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<sup>69</sup> Reverend Taylor's thought can be read in line with what James H. Cones explains in his article entitled "Black Spirituals: A Theological interpretation." Cones suggests that individual Blacks, most specifically pastors, take upon themselves the mission of saving their community from oppression "just as God delivered Moses and the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage" (Cones 19). It is such a biblical event which convinces Reverend Taylor of the possibility for him to save his people from starvation through spirituality without having necessarily to demonstrate in the street.

individual actions, not religious commitment, which can save the lives of those who have nothing.

Wright further revealed the danger of religious passivity in the lives of the dispossessed subjects. It still can be remembered that when Wright was refused food because of the unequal and individualistic society and claimed for his right to it, his mother just asked him to wait for God to provide food as though God was responsible for his hunger. The same situation can be seen in “Big Boy Leaves Home.” After killing Jim, Big Boy runs to his house and informs his family. For her mother, still entangled in her religious passivity, “only Gawd kin help [Big Boy] now [...]. Nobody but the good Lawd kin hep us now” (*UTC*, 33). Big Boy’s mother’s attitude can be put on a par with that of death-sentenced Bigger’s mother: “Honey, when ain’t nobody round you, when you alone get on your knees and tell God everything. Ask Him to guide you” (*NS*, 235). Realizing, however, that God will not intervene, Big Boy’s community decides to quit inaction and take responsibility: “Go t Brother Sanders n tell im Ah said c mere; n go t Brother Jenkins n tell im Ah said c mere; n go t Elder Peters n tell im Ah said c mere” (*UTC*, 39), Big Boy’s father orders. Once together, they start looking for urgent solutions. “Mabbe we kin hide im in the church till he kin git erway” (*UTC*, 39), Jenkins comes up with an idea. But the awareness of responsibility has already taken hold in Peter who turns this proposal down: “Naw, Brother, thall never do! Theyll git im there sho. N anyhow, ef they ketch im there itll ruin us all. We gotta git the boy outta town” (*UTC*, 39). This exchange is significant in that Wright highlights the naivety of Jenkins who believes that by hiding Big Boy in God’s house he will be saved, and the pragmatism of Peter who understands that only taking concrete actions can save Big Boy, just as Wright himself refused to wait for God to provide food and went out in search of a job, with the steadfast conviction that only his personal action could save him.

When Wright’s mother fell sick, instead of accommodating with Granny’s oppressive religious attitude towards him, he did not hesitate to denounce her faith. In a sense, Wright and his daily confrontations with his highly religious family members put forth a symbol of pragmatism versus faith. Granny’s belief that Ella’s sickness was the result of Wright’s secularism made them passive instead of finding solutions to save his mother, an episode he projects in *Black Boy*: “My grand-mother [...] more than once went further to interpret my mother’s long sickness as a result of my lack of faith” (*BB*, 108). Wright projects a similar scenario in “Down by the Riverside” where pragmatism is confronted with faith. Mann’s wife is in a state of emergency because she is in labor, but the family gathers to pray instead of looking out for solutions. “As his neighbors and fellow church members gather during the Great

Mississippi Flood of 1927 to pray for his wife, Mann's mind wanders to the practical considerations of transporting his wife to hospital in a stolen rowboat" (Caron 52). Obviously, the same pragmatism prevails in "Big Boy Leaves Homes" and particularly in Sanders who offers a pragmatic solution to save Big Boy from lynching: "Mah son, Will, the one whut drives fer the Magnolia Express Comny, is takin a truck o goods t Chicawgo in the mawnin. If we kin hide Big Boy somewhere till then, we kin put him on the truck" (*UTC*, 39). It is, of course, the latter solution which saves Big Boy from lynching. Analyzing the same scene, Jorvath interestingly deciphers Wright's intention:

Ultimately, Big Boy's escape is made possible by the triumph of the will and the collective agency of a religious acting in a non-religious way. In *Big Boy Leaves Home*, the reader witnesses first-hand the efficaciousness of a proactive Church and the potential of the Church as a body equipped to make politically-minded decisions. (Jorvath 14)

Clearly, Wright implies that it is not religion which saves individuals since it delves them into inaction; on the contrary, it is the committed person who can save the individual from the dispossession of his life as is the case in "Big Boy Leaves Homes." Wright's denunciation of the Church also emerges in *Native Son* through the words of Max who regrets "the silence of the Church" (*NS*, 299) and simply perceives religion "in terms of cosmic images and symbols which swallow the soul in fullness and wholeness" (*NS*, 307), to spiritually control the margin of freedom of the dispossessed subjects. Such a control is made possible thanks to the conscious or unconscious participation of religious leaders.

Sometimes, religious leaders are used as mouthpieces to make control effective and to maintain discipline and obedience among those who are submitted to dispossession, but once they can no longer ensure this control through their status, Wright shows that they are themselves dispossessed of their status and whipped like other dispossessed people. That is why, for Bigger Thomas, religion is only for "whipped people" (*NS*, 280). The use of religious leaders as mouthpieces is projected in *Uncle Tom Children* where Reverend Taylor enjoys the mayor's respect and favors and, in return, he must intervene between his food-dispossessed people and the dispossessors. One may further say he should also do in a way that religion stands between him and his own people to keep them from mistrusting him. Yet in doing so, McCarthy contends that Reverend Taylor has fallen into dilemma: "How to save his people and yet not bring new oppression on their heads from the whites, how to satisfy his constituency in the parish, and how to avoid conflict with the communists" (McCarthy 738). Once he fails to exercise control over the food-dispossessed people, either through his preaching or through his outreach, he is kidnapped and molested as the narrative reveals: "After all Dan, you and I have

worked together in the past and I don't see why we cant work together now. Ive backed you up in a lot of things, Dan (*UTC*, 162),” the mayor tells Taylor in an attempt to convince him to keep his community people from marching for food. When Taylor later fails to meet the mayor’s demands, a “whip wrapped itself around his neck, leaving a ring of fire [...]. A rope cut into his wrist [...]. The whip lashed across his bare back, *whick!*” (*UTC*, 162). Just like the other food-dispossessed people, Taylor, in his turn, is dispossessed of his freedom and whipped.

One of the most glaring roles of religion in dispossession that Wright denounces in his works remains the one which consists in confining and preventing people from enjoying individual freedom, because as long as their action remains collective, it is easier to contain them provided that one succeeds in convincing their religious leaders to act. That is exactly what the mayor does in an interview with Reverend Taylor: “There are twenty-five thousand people in this town [...]. You are a leader and you’ve got great influence over your congregation here [...]. I’m asking you now to use that influence and tell your people to stay off the streets tomorrow” (*UTC*, 151). Yet individual actions become difficult to control, hence the imprisonment of oppressed people in the shackles of religion which discourages any desire for liberation and individual action. The strategy which is used to discourage action really consists in masking the individuality of oppressed people so that they deny themselves for the tranquility of collective life as defined by the oppressors. Sidonie Ann Smith explains the role of religion in the masking of the oppressed: “Religion, since it denies the self, applauds the selfless and promises heavenly fulfillment, devalues the needs of oppressed blacks in the here-and-now and counsels them to be content with their racial position” (Smith 131). Beyond the racial position, it is the whole self which is condemned to remain in the anonymity of the mask<sup>70</sup>. Even though the individual manages to survive his alienation by confining himself in this mask for fear of the oppressor’s punishment for misconduct, any hope to escape the grip of oppression remains masked in accordance with the oppressor’s will.

According to Fabre, “Wright tends to consider religious beliefs shackles to individual freedom” (Fabre, 1985, 192). In other words, Wright perceives religion as a dispossessing tool used to deprive people of their capacity to question their existence in American society as individuals and to find awareness-raising answers. Religion is defined as fooling people into accepting alienating living conditions while waiting for utopist salvation. Religion, most

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<sup>70</sup> Smith further explains that masking denies self-assertion as the real self must be sacrificed to the mask. Accepting to stay in the mask permits the dispossessed to ensure survival. But Smith puts a damper concluding that even though accepting the mask through religion permits Blacks to ensure survival, this attitude prevents them from combating those who are responsible for their oppression and keeps them in invisibility (Smith 131).

specifically Christianity, is present in Blacks' life and this reality dates back to the post-slavery period. In the Christian belief, Jesus came to earth, suffered and died for the redemption of humankind, especially for the oppressed. As Mathew 5: 3-4 reads, "Blessed are those who know themselves to be poor, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs! Blessed are those who weep, for God will comfort them!"<sup>71</sup> (La Bible de Jerusalem, 1997). In this respect, though oppression makes the body suffer, it opens up a bright redemption to the soul in the after-life. Many Blacks liken their oppression and suffering to that of Jesus Christ and accept it as Christ accepted his passion, while waiting for the greatest reward in Heaven. It is not by rebelling against oppression that one gets out of it but rather by accepting it and praying God to change the oppressor's mind. Wright's own family shared the same Christian values and wanted to use it to dispossess him of his secularism. However, he disagreed with this way of experiencing religion which, for him, blindfolded Blacks in a way they could no longer perceive the racial predicament which yet stood before them every day. Such a disagreement is expressed in *Native Son* where Bigger sees his mother's religion rather as a whiskey that one drinks to forget his sorrows than as a soul-redeeming spiritual tool. "Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion" (*NS*, 198), Bigger thinks. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Reverend Taylor is initially kept by his religious stance from participating in a march against food dispossession (*UTC*, 144), and in *Black Boy*, Richard's mother, who cannot offer food to her family, is waiting for God to provide them for food but he never does so (*BB*, 22). Religious oppression is so stamped on Wright's consciousness that he half-admitted it had become part of his personality: "I sometimes wonder, although having abandoned this faith, if some of my current actions are not the consequence, in whole or in part, of the deep and extreme effects of the conditioning which I undergo then" (Wright in Fabre, 1986, 39). In short, whether in his private or public sphere, religion had alienated Wright's personality.

### 3. Alienation from the Private and Public Spheres

In "Thousand Plateaus," Deleuze and Guattari contend, "The book imitates the world" (3). So if the book imitates the world, it implies a book cannot be well understood if one does not primarily have knowledge of the sphere in which it is written, because the public sphere does influence book writing. Indeed, Wright's public sphere turned out to be an alienating

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<sup>71</sup> « Heureux ceux qui se savent pauvres en eux-mêmes, car le Royaume des cieux est à eux ! Heureux ceux qui pleurent, car Dieu les consolera! »



environment which permitted to understand how he came to protest literature and to the theme of dispossession. Paraphrasing Affinnih, Buchecker defines alienation as,

the conflicts and contradictions in the relation between individuals and society can be based either on a lack of social integration or on a lack of individual self-realization. Alienation is connected with a loss of meaning of life, a loss of control, a confusion of social identity, and a limited ability for social interaction. (Affinnih in Buchecker 280)

If Wright embraced protest writing to portray and fight against dispossession, it is because, beyond his ideological convictions, his writing perspective and subjects were strongly alienated from his private and public spheres. From a Deleuzean perspective, the public sphere is theoretically said to be open but, in reality, there still are territorialized environments which hinder minorities' free development as individuals, and even though Wright struggled to de-territorialize himself, these environments act as tightly-closed territories preventing him from physical, political and intellectual motion.

As mentioned earlier, Wright was born in Mississippi where racial segregation permeated every aspect of Blacks' daily lives. As a matter of fact, after the Proclamation of Emancipation, Mississippi remained a very poor state where lands were still not well exploited<sup>72</sup>. Thus, many Blacks moved to this area in order to get unoccupied lands for farming and timber exploitation. The Reconstruction then permitted them to possess their own lands for farming<sup>73</sup>. Nevertheless, the arrival in power of white democrats complicated Blacks' living conditions as segregationist laws were passed to dispossess them of their properties, transgressing the sacred Hegelian principle according to which "occupancy makes the matter of the thing my property, since matter itself does not belong to itself, [and] a thing belongs to the person who happens to be the first in time to take it into his possession" (Hegel 52). Although Blacks made up over half of the total population in Mississippi (Walter 11), they were excluded from public life. Mississippi was, therefore, fully ruled by the white minority who extended discriminatory laws against Blacks. But how can a minor group rule over a major one

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<sup>72</sup> President Abraham Lincoln issued the Proclamation of Emancipation on January 1, 1863, as the nation approached its third year of bloody civil war. Emancipation was seen as the only hope for African Americans whose future exclusively depended on the abolition of slavery. However, when emancipation eventually was proclaimed, it remained on paper as a life of slavery continued to be the daily experience of formally free slaves. In clearer terms, the abolition of slavery did not bring the true emancipation that black slaves expected, which pushed some freed slaves into embracing artistic creation as the only tribune to claim for true emancipation.

<sup>73</sup> The Reconstruction Era (1866-1877) was a period in the United States' history during which slavery was definitely abolished and the Confederate States returned under the rule of the Federal one. It also aimed to enfranchise former slaves so as to integrate them into the American society. In this respect the principle according to which former slaves could have a right to private property was accepted by the Federal government dominated by Republicans. Nevertheless, when radical democrats regained control over Congress and southern states through elections (many of them rigged), they called the full emancipation of African Americans into question through the enforcement of discriminatory laws.

in a democratic country? Indeed, the notion of majority does not depend on number but on power relations. In other words, a community is not the main group because its people outnumber that of other communities but because it is capable of taking power and imposing its rules, which can be likened to Deleuze's perception of majority:

Majority implies a constant of expression or content, like a yardstick against which it is evaluated [...]. Majority supposes a state of power and domination, and not the reverse. [...] Another determination is that the constant will therefore be considered as a minority, by nature and whatever its number, that is to say as a subsystem or as outside the system<sup>74</sup>. (Deleuze, Guattari, 1975, 133)

Despite their minority in number, Whites were in reality the major community in Mississippi, because they had been able to dominate the black majority by creating a subsystem outside the national system permitting them to dispossess colored people of their fundamental rights:

Blacks [were] put out of the normative framework which defined American identity. By its reductive and devastating effect, racial minoring then made it possible to further extend the gap between majority and minority [...]. To the feeling of exclusion, inseparable from this marginalization, that of latent insecurity and violence, both physical and psychological, was also added<sup>75</sup>. (Barroso-Fontanel 67)

Real events in American society provide credit to Barroso-Fontanel's contention as discriminatory laws were passed on poll taxes, budget cuts to the detriment of colored schools and lynching was also made legal to repress any protest from the oppressed minority. Wright depicts this reality in *Black Boy* through Richard's own uncle Hoskins who is dispossessed of his business and summarily lynched simply because his white counterparts are jealous of his success story. "I learned afterwards that Uncle Hoskins had been killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing business" (*BB*, 63), Richard confesses. In Mississippi public life, Wright was also deprived of quality education not only because of his own lack of regular school attendance but also of the de-territorialization of Black American schools from the public educational standards.

Territorialization is not only an abstract concept for Wright as it goes further to materialize in physical territorialization excluding him and his community from land ownership. Wright's own father experienced territorial dispossession in a way that obliged him

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<sup>74</sup> « Majorité implique une constante, d'expression ou de contenu, comme un mètre-étalon par rapport auquel elle s'évalue [...] La majorité suppose un état de pouvoir et de domination, et non l'inverse [...] une autre détermination que la constante sera donc considérée comme minoritaire, par nature et quel que soit son nombre, c'est-à-dire comme un sous-système ou comme hors système. »

<sup>75</sup> « Les Noirs sont relégués hors du cadre normatif qui définit l'identité américaine. Par son effet réducteur et dévastateur, la minoration raciale permet alors de creuser davantage le fossé qui sépare majorité et minorité(s) [...]. Au sentiment d'exclusion, indissociable de cette mise en marge, s'ajoute également celui d'insécurité et de violence latentes, aussi bien physique que psychologique. »

to shift from land ownership into sharecropping, and we are made to understand this situation in *Black Boy* through Richard's account:

A quarter of a century was to elapse between the time I saw my father sitting with the strange woman and the time when I was to see him again, standing alone upon red clay of Mississippi plantation, a sharecropper, clad in ragged overalls, holding a muddy hoe in gnarled, veined hands [...]. When I visited him on the plantation, he was standing against the sky, smiling toothless, his hair whitened, his body bent, his eyes glazed with dim recollection. (*BB*, 42)

Such a situation obliged Blacks to pour out from Mississippi into other areas in search of better living conditions. This was the case of Wright who moved to Memphis under the helpless eyes of his father, and who was aware things were wrong for them but still ignored the deep reasons of his family suffering. As a young boy, Wright could not understand why his kinsmen were differently treated in the public sphere because, at an early age, black and white children could sometimes play together, but as they grew into adolescence, white children were taught the racial reality according to which they were superior to Blacks, while the latter were taught to accept their inferiority and display it in public places. That is the reason why, in *Black Boy*, even though Richard asks his mother questions related to race, he does not receive any satisfactory answers. "Why did the white man whip the black boy" (*BB*, 31), Richard asks his mother. "You are too young to understand" (*BB*, 31), his mother replies. As he later notices, "my mother became irritated when I questioned her about Whites and Blacks, and I could not quite understand it" (*BB*, 55). Ella does not answer Richard because the subject is a traumatic one and talking about it resuscitates this trauma. She could have explained to Richard that the white man beats the black boy because he is refused certain civil rights but she prefers keeping him as a child away from such a subject to protect him from the trauma that it brings about.

When the Civil Rights Movement broke out, Mississippi became one of the epicenters of social unrest due to Blacks willing to regain their rights. As the historical analyst Michael W. Fuquay reveals,

Segregationists had long maintained that integration would render education impossible because of what they deemed the moral and mental inferiority of black people [...] and lambasted the public schools as a hopeless loss, infected by the lethal virus of race mixing. [...] Most segregationists continued their fight for segregated public schools. (Fuquay 163)

Because Blacks were intensifying their protest through the Civil Rights Movement against Blacks' segregation from public life, repression through Jim Crow laws and other strategies persisted in Mississippi in a parallel way, as corroborated by Alexander Mabry: "True enough, the Negro majority [was] already being repressed by blood-shed, bribery, ballot-stuffing"

(Mabry 329). In the South, the little privileges brought by the Reconstruction were shadowed by most southern states which finally passed new constitutions and laws dispossessing Blacks from civil rights. The deprivation of the rights to vote, to have property, to sit on juries or run for election or official positions prevented Blacks from sharing the same rights as Whites. Public facilities were divided into White-only facilities and Colored-only facilities. These discriminatory laws gave rise to violence against Blacks including humiliations, intimidations, lynching, in a word, restriction of Blacks' public life, dragging along a huge black movement out to Chicago. In such a violent environment, Wright witnessed all these forms of dispossession and internalized protest against his alienating environment which denied his public identity.

It is understood that all individuals live in a given environment and the environment surrounding the individual can be physical or non-physical. The physical environment can be composed of materials such as houses, motorcycles, cars and buses, work places, traffic, food and restaurants, fellow humans, animals etc., while the non-physical environment can be composed of some elements such as mood, traditions, cultures, thoughts, interpersonal relations, in a word, social life. As already proved by a number of sociologists and psychologists such as Zaman *et al.*, "a child's development is strongly influenced by the parenting style, his public environment and culture" (Zaman *et al.*112). In this respect, the private and public spheres become key elements to determining an individual's place in social relationship. Although Anthony P. Cohen contends that, "engaging in social relationships does not necessarily deprive the individual of self-direction" (Cohen 24), it could not be denied that whether private or public environment is physical or non-physical, it does have significant influence on the individual. If so, the private or public environment is important in influencing the individual's social or moral direction. Psychosocial analysts have established a relationship between the mental, emotional and psychological state of the individual and his surrounding environment. In his work entitled *Childhood and Society*, Erikson establishes the relationship between psychological, emotional, relational development and the social and/or cultural environment. Erikson prioritizes eight stages of the individual's development while indicating the direct consequence for the breaking of each stage. Thus, according to Erikson, an absence of basic trust leads to basic distrust, a lack of autonomy leads to shame and doubt, a lack of initiative leads to guilt, a lack of industry leads to inferiority, a lack of identity leads to role confusion, a lack of intimacy leads to isolation, a lack of generosity leads to stagnation, a lack of ego integrity leads to despair (Erikson 222-243). From Erikson's analysis, it becomes clear that environment, whether physical or non-physical, significantly influenced Wright.

The private and public spheres usually dictate the individual's behavior as demonstrated by psychologist Lynton:

Between the natural environment and the individual, always interpose a human environment which is infinitely more significant. This human environment consists in an organized group of individuals, that is, a society, and of one particular way of living that is characteristic of this group, that is, a human culture which determines the formation of most of his models, his way of behaving, and even the formation of his deepest answers<sup>76</sup>. (Lynton 16)

Lynton suggests that human environment is the most important element which significantly influences the individual's behavior in society and one can establish a link with Wright whose social environment alienated him in a way to force him to keep on adjusting his behavior according to the environment he lived therein. Wright's behavior was, in fact, the result of his alienation to unjust social environment which denied him social interaction and his meaning of life as already acknowledged by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* wherein he claims that the individual and society cannot be reconciled unless the former moves out of subjectivity to become a concrete self through self-conscious integration in the latter. From a Hegelian perspective, society must create the trustful environment for the individual to renounce his subjective freedom in favor of a collective set of codes or norms called objective rights (Hegel 34-40). To draw from Hegel's thought, it can be suggested that individuals living in different environments would display attitudes according to the type of environment in which they find themselves. In a racist environment, for instance, where individuals are viewed as inferior beings, they can develop rebellious attitudes or accept their alienation from the conditions of their so-called inferiority which can be referred to as learned inferiority. Wright was sometimes compelled to learn his public inferiority for his own survival, a situation which Richard mirrors in *Black Boy*: "I learned new modes of behavior, new rules in how to live the Jim Crow life" (*BB*, 221). Indeed, Wright was compelled to learn not only a Jim Crowist social life but also political alienation once he decided to be committed in public life through the Communist Party.

When Wright arrived in Chicago, he became acquainted with the Communist Party, certainly because of the prevailing hostile socio-political context<sup>77</sup>. Yet his personal philosophy

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<sup>76</sup> « Entre l'environnement naturel et l'individu, s'interpose toujours un environnement humain infiniment plus significatif. Cet environnement humain consiste en un groupe organisé d'individus, c'est-à-dire une société, et d'un mode de vie particulier qui caractérise ce groupe, c'est-à-dire une culture humaine qui détermine la formation de la plupart de ses modèles, sa conduite, et même la formation de ses réponses les plus profondes. »

<sup>77</sup> From early 1900 to the mid-1920s, no fewer than one hundred thousand African American community members left the Deep South to settle in Illinois, most specifically in Chicago (Fabre, 1986, 69), where Blacks' living conditions were far better compared to the segregated Deep South. Chicago was the Promised Land for Blacks fleeing the South as they hoped to change their social status. As a result, according to James Gregory, 500, 000 Blacks ultimately moved to Chicago between 1915 and 1945 (Gregory 12). In the South the little privileges brought

of life complicated his relationship not only with the Communist Party but also with the black movement for racial emancipation. In fact, Wright had joined the Communist Party because he shared the same principles of anti-proletarian and anti-racial exploitation which prevailed in the United States. For Wright, individual freedom was sacred and this point of view obliged him to resign from the Communist Party which was against the priority of individuality over collectivity. Notwithstanding his struggles to reform the communist ideology from within, he was quickly put in a position of minority. Instead of lamenting in such a position, however, Wright started what could initially be called a minor literary career which took his individual intrigue further and connected it to his own politics in a new intense commitment, much like Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) approach to minor literature: "Minor literature's cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it" (17). By leaving the communists' tendency to alienate his individual's public commitment to their ideology, Wright really de-territorialized his ideological commitment from the Party and re-territorialized it in the Chicagoan Sociology where the individual particularity was much more taken into consideration, and his sense of public alienation mitigated.

Wright's sense of public alienation also found its roots in the rise of capitalism in the West which, instead of bringing happiness to every people, considerably contributed to widening the gap between the rich and the poor. In addition to racism, capitalism made material possession the only tool to measure the value of man in society; and since Wright as a black man was among the most vulnerable in terms of material possession, he was marginalized and exploited by wealthy people. This feeling was reinforced during his trip to Africa when he saw Africans' extreme poverty as settlers looted their natural resources and made them work in tough conditions to fuel their industries. Accounting for his trip to Africa, Wright asserted:

I had seen the Ford factories in River Rouge, but it was nothing like that dreadful, hellish stain. [...] There are circumstances where human life is nothing human. I had just had an example and I did not know what solution to envision for this particular case of barbarism. I wouldn't have gone on strike if I had worked there; no! in the worst distress, I would not even have come to work in this hell. (*Black Power*, 148).

As Wright witnessed Africans' social and economic alienation, one may suspect that he had become convinced that this phenomenon was a universal human pattern. In other words, Wright

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by the Reconstruction were shadowed by most southern states which finally passed new constitutions and laws dispossessing Blacks from their civil rights.

may have come to the conclusion that everywhere humans live, one group always attempts to dominate others. In such circumstances, those who are dominated cannot get solace until they stand together and fight for their survival.

Based on Wright's own words, suspicion turns into conviction about alienation and the necessity for the alienated people, regardless of skin color, to stand together in a universal fight: "The situation of oppressed peoples is the same everywhere in the world and their solidarity is essential, not only to combat oppression, but also to fight for human progress"<sup>78</sup> (Wright in Fabre, 1986, 269). The phrase is so released, "to fight for human progress," which means Wright had become a self-appointed defender of the oppressed regardless of their origins. Once it became clear alienation was a universal pattern in human relations, Wright's perception of the world radically changed and he went beyond racial issues to fight all forms of oppression and alienation of so-called minor peoples. Therefore, while Wright decided to leave the Communist Party in the United States because of his distrust of its alienating and possessive manners, he, henceforth, subordinated his writing to political action for the political, economic and cultural independence of colonized and oppressed people. It can be understood that *Black Power* and *White Man, Listen!* were written to meet this imperative if one considers Wright's suggestion:

[...] The West must accept its responsibility for colonization and its effects in order to create the means by which white men can liberate themselves from their fears. [...] It is almost impossible for the white man to determine just what a Negro is really feeling, unless that white man, like a Gunnar Myrdal, is gifted with a superb imagination. (*Black Power* 653, 670, 671)

Here, Wright's anti-dispossession policy becomes clear, namely to bring dispossessors to shoulder their responsibilities for the harmful effects of dispossession, then to invite them to show great imagination to understand colored people in their socio-cultural differences in order to respect and recognize their right. For Joshua Hall, Wright appealed to Westerners because, "he diagnose[d] one of the chief causes of global racial injustice as the imaginative poverty of white Westerners" (Hall 65). However, Wright did not advocate for racial and cultural separatism as Baldwin once accused him. On the contrary, he encouraged equality in difference and unity in diversity, and assistance of the richest to the poorest so as they could get out of socio-economic alienation, just as Fabre lets us know in his reading of Wright's sentiment: "While proclaiming their pride in having freed themselves, a billion and a half human beings

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<sup>78</sup> « La situation des peuples opprimés est partout la même dans le monde et leur solidarité est essentielle, non seulement pour combattre l'oppression, mais aussi lutter pour le progrès humain. »

asked their former masters to repudiate their colonialist and racist attitudes, especially in Africa, and to help them industrialize”<sup>79</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 295).

Wright was really faced with unjust racial exigencies, including taboos on cross-racial sexual relations between Whites and Blacks in Arkansas. While a white man could abuse a black girl without being troubled, Blacks were totally forbidden to have any sexual relations with Whites. It was also deemed taboo for a black person to have a say in discussion at work or talk about white American women. Wright and his community members were also forbidden to address political issues capable of raising awareness. This hard reality is conveyed in *Uncle Tom's Children* where Wright remarks:

I found that many subjects were taboo from the white man's point of view. Among the topics they did not like to discuss with Negroes were the following: American women, the Ku Klux Klan; France, and the Negro soldiers fared while there; French women; Jack Johnson; entire northern part of the United States, the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Grant; General Sherman, Catholics; the Pope; Jews; the Republican Party; slavery; social stability; Communism; Socialism; the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution; or any topic calling for positive knowledge or manly self-assertion on the part of the Negro. (*UTC*, 14)

As this excerpt reveals, it is no secret that a number of subjects were censored to Blacks and this censorship can be linked to political and social reasons. Abraham Lincoln, the Republican Party, France and French women were taboo subjects simply because they were the symbols of universal freedom. So, lest these figures served as models for Blacks to stand up for their rights, it was preferable to keep them out of public debate. As for the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Constitution, they all spoke in favor of Blacks as the former declared the abolition of slavery of any kind while the latter gave Blacks full U.S. citizenship, which pro-Jim Crow Whites did not want to hear about. Such restrictions evoke Ricœur's notion of selected or abusively guided memory which a major group imposes on society with the aim of territorializing the national debate in subjects carefully selected in a way to throw those considered as dangerous into the margin. Socialism and communism were considered as dangerous for the American Socio-political Establishment and particularly for those who promoted McCarthyism which finally put Wright under Intelligence Service control. Following the publication of *Black Boy* which had strengthened Wright's fame as a committed writer, his public life was threatened by McCarthyism and radical groups such as the Ku Klux Klan because of his revolutionary ideas

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<sup>79</sup> « Tout en proclamant leur fierté de s'être libérés, un milliard et demi d'êtres humains demandaient à leurs anciens maîtres de répudier leurs attitudes colonialistes et racistes, en particulier en Afrique, et de les aider à s'industrialiser. »



that fewer Blacks dared express<sup>80</sup>. In this respect, Wright admitted: “Had I not left my native land [...] I would have perished in the atmosphere of political hysteria of McCarthyism” (Wright in Gayle 195). It is certainly for fear of getting into troubles with these forces that he resolved to move to a favorable territory, France.

The biggest consequence of public alienation on Wright was his radical decision to definitely leave the United States for France, because developing his own image and self-experience was made impossible by the hostile environment. His withdrawal from American public life is consistent with Buchecker’s concept of “withdrawal from public place as a consequence of alienation between the individual and the social community” (Buchecker 280). For Buchecker, to overcome such an alienation, one of the solutions is for the individual “to abandon personal claims, and to adapt to societal rules and roles” (280). However, because Wright held individual freedom sacred and as a result was not ready to cross out his personal claims, he literally de-territorialized himself from the alienating society nurtured by ubiquitous Jim Crow laws. Wright confirmed the ubiquity of Jim Crowism in the interview with the French newspaper *L'Express*:

Every Black has the experience of what the life of "Jim Crow" is like. Just because he was born there, the first thing he knows when he was born in Mississippi is that he was born in a ghetto. So begins for him the experience of the "Jim Crow" life. He will attend classes at a "Jim Crow" school, attend religious services in a "Jim Crow" church; if he takes a bus, it will be a "Jim Crow" bus, if he goes into a restaurant for a meal, it will still be a "Jim Crow" restaurant; in short, he will continue this existence of "Jim Crow" to the cemetery, because, when he dies, it will be a death of "Jim Crow". From the cradle to the grave, he will be subjected to racial discrimination that will not even end with his death. Such is the existence of Blacks in the southern states. It is against this that their "folded arms" strikes are organized: against this harsh racial discrimination which does not even abdicate before death<sup>81</sup>. (Wright in *L'Express*, 2008)

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<sup>80</sup> McCarthyism was named from Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. During the 1950s, in the heights of the Cold War, McCarthyism consisted in organizing a witch hunt against communists and their sympathizers in the United States. The Ku Klux Klan was created in Pulaski, Tennessee in December 1865 by six former confederate combatants, John C. Lester, James R. Crowe, John D. Kennedy, Calvin Jones, Richard R. Reed, and Frank O. McCord, who refused to abide by the Union governed by their northern enemies (Yancey 62-63). Their basic objectives were to prevent Blacks from taking their freedom in the South by means of intimidation, kidnapping, torturing and lynching.

<sup>81</sup> « Tout Noir a l'expérience de ce qu'est la vie de "Jim Crow". Du simple fait qu'il y naît, la première chose qu'il sait, quand il naît dans le Mississippi, est qu'il est né dans un ghetto. Ainsi commence pour lui l'expérience de la vie "Jim Crow". Il fréquentera les cours d'une école "Jim Crow", assistera aux offices religieux dans une église "Jim Crow" ; s'il prend un autobus, ce sera un autobus "Jim Crow", s'il entre dans un restaurant pour prendre un repas, ce sera encore un restaurant "Jim Crow"; bref, il poursuivra cette existence de "Jim Crow" jusqu'au cimetière, car, quand il mourra, ce sera d'une mort de "Jim Crow". Du berceau jusqu'au tombeau, il sera soumis à une discrimination raciale qui ne prendra même pas fin avec son trépas. Telle est l'existence des Noirs des Etats du Sud. C'est contre cela que sont organisées leurs grèves des "bras croisés" : contre cette dure discrimination raciale qui n'abdique même pas devant la mort. »

To understand Wright’s overall racial perception of the United States, read his entire interview with *L'Express* in Appendix 1.

As can be felt, the persistence of the various forms of alienation finally got the upper hand on the writer's stability and his determination to fight alienating evils from outside. Jim Crow laws were the basic reasons accounting for Wright's physical de-territorialization. Indeed, he was actually forced by the unfavorable socio-political circumstances to flee his home country so as to find a land more auspicious to the expression of his individuality. There was obviously none anywhere for him except France, the country of human rights. That is confirmed by Wright himself in his interview with *L'Express*. When asked whether or not public discrimination had led him to leave the United States, his answer leaves no room for ambiguity: "Yes, to live in a wider and freer world. I still find certain racial restrictions here, but they are in no way comparable to those which prevail there, in this ghetto atmosphere. I'm at home here [France]" (In *L'Express*, 2008). Wright, therefore, left the American public sphere after writing two of his masterpieces, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* which both remain symbols of his identity as a deconstructionist writer.

#### **4. Wright's Deconstructionist School of Thought**

Deconstructionism emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as a brand new analytical philosophy. It gained wider grounds to hit political, economic, literary, aesthetic, and phenomenological spheres. Basically, deconstructionism was a new critical approach of traditional philosophy of truth through the use of language. In traditional philosophies, truth is self-evident and independent of the language which is used to unravel it through the combination of linguistic patterns. In these philosophies, truth tends to be based on binary oppositions such as good versus bad, short versus long, truth versus lie, rich versus poor, presence versus absence. These traditional philosophies were developed by the likes of Plato (428/427-348/ 347 BC), Ferdinand De Saussure (1857-1913), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), to quote but a few. With the advent of deconstructionism, however, the notion of truth through language became problematic as the likes of Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Jean François Lyotard (1924-1998), Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) came up with new critical approach to traditional philosophy. Derrida's deconstructionist approach, will be examined in this section to understand Wright's quests.

Derrida's approach is based upon Martin Heidegger's concept of destruction of tradition. Destruction consists in questioning the notion of truth as a universal and stable entity

that neither place nor time can influence. Taking Heidegger's philosophy further, Derrida sets out to demonstrate the inconsistencies that are already inherent in traditional thinking of truth as self-evidence based upon a system of binary oppositions. He claims that any definition or understanding people have of a given phenomenon is an infinite process of differing which keeps meaning constantly moving and shifting within heterogeneities. While traditional thinkers posit that truth is not the property of language or thoughts but a self-evident entity, Derrida contends that meaning is rather a matter of text, a complex combination of linguistic patterns which interweave with other patterns, much like a Deleuzian rhizome, in a constant process of *différance* (Derrida, 1967, 1976). In other words, meaning is present and absent at the same time; it is still underway, which suggests that truth is relative and unreachable. Wanting to impose one's understanding of facts as universal truth is purely philosophical dictatorship. Wright's deconstructionist approach has much to do with Derrida's deconstructionism as it questions the traditional commonly accepted concept of human relations.

Since the advent of life in society, the question of human relations has always been raised acutely. How does one determine oneself in relation to others? Can one live in the margin of society, that is to say without the men and women who compose it? The answer is obviously negative with regard to the interdependence that life in society requires. For sure, life in society requires relationship between people. Nevertheless, in human relationships, people have always felt the need to have an identity which distinguishes them from others and to apply an identity to others in order to establish the differences between them. This is the case with Bigger Thomas who is in quest of identity in *Native Son* (NS, 277-279). As a result, criteria like age, gender, economic, social and political status and skin color are used to determine differences between people. As a general rule, this differentiation between people aims only at categorizing everyone in a framework in order to facilitate human relationships. Unfortunately, such elements as social, economic, political status and skin color have been transformed into tools for demonstrating the superiority of one group over another, thus leading to domination and even oppression of one group over another. The American society is no exception to this rule.

After the abolition of slavery, the American society continued to be polarized according to racial, social, economic and political affiliations much like in the traditional conception of life which is built on binary oppositions. Thus, Whites, Hispanics and Blacks, republicans and democrats, liberals and communists found themselves in competition, each group seeking, beyond its identity, to gain the upper hand on the other group and to impose its vision on human

relationships. In other words, identifying each other according to their race lead to racial segregation in accordance with Deborah Thomas's suggestion that, "a dominant idea is that in the United States people are socialized into two-tier view of race relations rooted in institutionalized segregation" (Thomas 519). This idea is confirmed in *Black Boy*: "We were now enough for the white boys to fear us and both of us, the white boys and the black boys, began to play our traditional racial roles [...]. Whenever we caught a white boy on our side we stoned him; if we strayed to their side, they stoned us" (*BB*, 93). The racial socialization into white and black consciousness turns into violence since it leads to the exclusion of Blacks out of the economic, cultural and political systems. The racial socialization which leads to interracial violence is transported into artistic and literary creation where Blacks make a powerful weapon of it to fight against the marginalization and discrimination of their community on the basis of their skin color and especially their status as former slaves and second-class citizens. It is against this backdrop that Wright adopted a deconstructionist position on human relations.

Wright's initial call for collective action against injustice, oppression, segregation and discrimination stemmed from his participation in the Communist Party which certainly gave him a new identity and a tribune, as Juan Gomez reveals: "It allow[ed] his isolated suffering to be projected onto a global stage where his individual tale [became] one with that of millions of others; their plight [became] part of his life and he [became] part of their struggle" (Gomez 36). In other words, Wright did not want to remain in the margin any longer. Nor did he want to remain voiceless when facing marginalization. Rather, he moved from the margin to stand in the center of the marginalized people and to speak for them in a way that they are recognized. In achieving this goal, Wright displayed what is named *affect* according to Deleuze's theory:

The *affect* is the power of assertiveness: As opposed to psychoanalytic suggestions or some philosophical approaches such as Lyotard's or Agamben's, the *affect* is neither related to trauma nor to any experience linked to loss, but it appears, on the contrary, as a power of life, a power of assertiveness:<sup>82</sup>. (Deleuze in Bessis, 2003)

It is clear from Deleuze's definition that the *affect* Wright demonstrated was not an ordinary one as usually defined by psychologists or philosophers. In spite of dispossession (loss) and lynching (trauma), he did not give up his assertiveness. He rather showed it through his writing in the John Reed Club in a way to *affect* those who were marginalized or dispossessed. As

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<sup>82</sup> « L'affect est puissance d'affirmation : à l'opposé des propositions de la psychanalyse ou de certaines approches philosophiques telles que celles de Lyotard, ou d'Agamben, l'affect n'est pas rapporté à un trauma, ni à une expérience originaire de la perte, mais il apparaît au contraire comme puissance de vie, puissance d'affirmation. »

Wright himself admits, “Communism is for me a way of life, a spectacle of life, an unusual mode of existence, an intense drama [...]. There is nothing to go back to” (Wright in Gayle 123). One could paraphrase him by saying communism was an *affect* of life to Wright.

As Wright’s statement reveals above, there was nothing better than communism, hence his firm will to move forward in this ideology. He continued to be involved in communism while advocating for equality between human beings and called those who were oppressed for collective actions against their oppressors, as is illustrated in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, where Reverend Taylor ensures his son that individual action cannot address the racial issue. “C mon son! Ahm awright [...]. Yuh cant do nothing erlone, Jimmy” (*UTC*, 169), Reverend Taylor, who has been beaten up by a white mob, talks to Jimmy in an attempt to convince him that he should refrain from individual action in favor of a collective one. However, Wright fundamentally changed around the 1940s to favor individual awareness and action as a means to come to terms with domination and oppression.

The 1940s marked a change which can be described as abrupt in Wright’s perception of relationships between human beings. Indeed, the relative failure of collective movements such as the NAACP and the UNIA to achieve equality between Whites and Blacks and even between poor Blacks and middle-class Blacks probably disappointed Wright who might have thought collective action would not bear significant fruits in a short period of time in the fight for social justice and equality<sup>83</sup>. Moreover, even if communism succeeded in influencing him into collective struggle, one could say that his individualistic inclinations to express himself outside any framework of communist control and the communists’ tendency to deny him his freedom of speech ended up convincing him there could be no collective resistance without any prior individual freedom and awareness of the enormous challenges to be taken up at socio-ideological, cultural and political levels. It is this need for the individual to de-territorialize himself from the collective framework and freely express his individual self, exactly as he felt it, which led Wright to leave the Communist Party and to be wary of populist political associations. This change of vision is seen in *Black Boy* where Richard engages in a fierce

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<sup>83</sup> The NAACP was criticized by the younger generation of black masses as too latent, inappropriate and even outdated. They advocated for more visible actions on the ground so as to accelerate desegregation and equal rights. As for the UNIA it was viewed with suspicion by many Blacks because it sought to bring all Black Americans back to Africa to build a black nation, which appeared utopic in fact. The main criticism levied against the UNIA was its failure to achieve its basic goal, namely bringing Black Americans back to Africa. In his criticism of Garveyism, Wright wrote, “[...] I pitied them too much to tell them that they could never achieve their goal, that Africa was owned by the imperial powers of Europe, that their lives alien to the mores of the natives of Africa, that they were people of the West and would forever be so until they either merged with the West or perished” (*AH*, 29).

struggle to assert his individual identity in American society, starting first within his own family, then at school, then in the street.

The identity crisis of the individual manifests itself in *Black Boy* through Richard's grandfather who, following an error made during the registration of his name, finds himself without pension as an individual in the large group of war veterans. He fights individually to recover his pension and to be recognized within the large family of the United States' war veterans. Wright's project was to deconstruct the nature of human relationships dominated by racial, social and political considerations in order to advocate for the identification of man as an individual like any other individuals. In other words, Wright wanted to de-territorialize the collective power through lines of flight in order to re-territorialize it into the individual which constitutes the very basis on which the collective relies to build itself. In this case, the individual who is initially viewed by the collective as a minor being becomes a major one. This way of reconsidering the role of the individual from minor to major modes reflects Deleuze's deconstructionist perception of the role of the individual as serving to annihilate every form of hierarchy between people just like a rhizome. "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987, 7). The adoption of this individualistic position, in simpler terms, consists in no longer wanting to do like the others by de-territorializing oneself from traditions and standards so as to connect to other realities as a rhizome. This position triggered the wrath not only of Wright's black peers but also of his government which viewed him as potentially violent.

One of the fundamental elements of Wright's deconstructionist thinking that made him such a controversial writer remains the use of violence by his characters as they are in search of identity, legitimacy and recognition. In this respect, Lawrence Jackson contends:

Wright's great leap in understanding, notwithstanding his global fame and notoriety, revolved around his regular use of violence in his fictions as means of enabling his black characters to attain their full humanity. While his thematic obsession with black violence was shocking, Wright never flattered his black audiences; until the end of his life, he challenged and criticized the health and value of the black cultural tradition. (Jackson, 2006)

The majority of black fictions of Wright's time were more or less pacifist in their struggle for racial equality, a literary tradition criticized as being too healthy and flattering. Through his writing, Wright did not seem to be against the idea of using violence to achieve full humanity, because as Saint-Arnaud argues, "he indeed aim[ed] at a target or, even better, at the ideal of

an essentially deep social transformation and in principle [did] not rule out violence, if ever necessary or inevitable”<sup>84</sup> (Saint-Arnaud 57).

In a context of domination and oppression, there are two possible options for the dominated or the oppressed people: either negotiate with their oppressor to obtain freedom or make use of rebellion to escape from the yoke of the oppressor. Wright sought to deconstruct the first option used by the majority of black writers, and to reconstruct the second one through individual literary commitment, hence the fact his fiction is crowded with cases of violence such as Heartfield’s, Mary’s and Hoskins’s killings respectively in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Violence is a reprehensible act and no-one, except the state, has monopoly on legitimate violence. Wright deconstructs this approach and legitimizes violence used by the minor group to escape oppression. In Wright’s deconstructionist thinking, it is not legality which determines the need to resort to violence; it is rather legitimacy which determines its use, and this is seen in the three works under study. In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Mann’s son steals the boat of a white man called Heartfield so as to save his family from flooding and particularly his pregnant wife who is in labor. Heartfield catches them red-handed and starts shooting at Mann. The latter fires back and kills him on the spot (*UTC*, 57-69). In this scene, one could say that the white man is in self-defense since his private property has been violated by intruders. However, it is rather the intruders who are favored by Wright, because Blacks, including the Mann’s family in question, are economically dispossessed and, as a result, they steal the white man’s boat in an attempt to save their lives. Also, it is only when Heartfield shoots at Mann that he fires back, which suggests he is in self-defense: “Mann held still, frozen. He stared at the gun in the white man’s hand. [...] The white man stooped, aimed and shot. [...] Mann fumbled in his pocket for his gun and held it ready. He fired, twice” (*UTC*, 68-69). In this scene, it can be understood that Heartfield, instead of being a sweet man as his name suggests, is finally heartless as he does not care about Mann’s desperate situation which leads him to use the stolen boat. Heartfield does not really view Mann as a man. It is not only until he defends himself to save his family that he becomes a man, just like Bigger in *Native Son* becomes a man with a clear-cut identity after committing murder. By the way, it is interesting to examine the two protagonists’ names. Mann is written with a double “n” which means he is majored and becomes a major human being after his murder, just as the name “Bigger” carries the mark of the comparative of superiority, meaning that following his murder of Mary, he is

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<sup>84</sup> « Il poursuit en effet un objectif ou, mieux encore, un idéal essentiellement de l’ordre d’une transformation sociale en profondeur et n’écarter pas, du moins en principe, si jamais jugé nécessaire ou inévitable, la violence. »

also majored and moves up to a superior status to become bigger than a minor being. In a word, both get an identity after their respective murders, which highlights Wright's deconstructionist perspective.

Wright's deconstructionist approach to violence is more controversial in *Native Son*. Why a young black man named Bigger Thomas, after having abused and smothered a white girl named Mary, can still benefit from extenuating circumstances? the reader could ask. The answer from Wright's deconstructionist point of view is simply because he does not perceive black violence in a conventional way. According to him, Bigger has not committed any crime and is even in self-defense against a social organization which has oppressed him since his birth. The reader is led to understand Bigger's thought when Wright writes:

Rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack of killing one [...]. He was a long taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. (*NS*, 190)

As one can understand from Bigger, the act of raping and killing is not violence as such, but rather the result of the oppression of the individual by a socio-political organization which stretches like rubber, snaps and holds him against a wall to such an extent that he loses his identity as an individual. It is only by killing that Bigger emerges from oppression to feel recognized as a full member of his community. That is why, while he makes the headlines of newspapers and has become the talk of the town, he "ain't sorry she's dead" (*NS*, 275). On the contrary, he now feels a rediscovered identity, since his act allows him to "feel a confidence, a fullness, a freedom, a supreme and meaningful act" (*NS*, 101). Just as Bigger commits crime to protest against his marginal social position and to gain recognition as an intrinsic individual in a context of racial turmoil, Wright protested against the overall difficult situation of Blacks by his non-conformist and protest writing.



### **CHAPTER III: PROTESTING AGAINST THE SITUATION OF BLACK AMERICANS: NON-CONFORMIST WRIGHT'S VISION AND TOOLS**

An analytical look at Wright's personality shows that he was a writer like no other. His whole life was punctuated by disagreements between him and his public and private environments in such a way that he often stood alone to defend his ideals. His personality was characterized above all by his revolutionary or deconstructionist ideas both in his interpersonal relationships and in his writing. Because Wright's private and public environments intended to define him without him, protest became the only choice left to him. How to protest, however, against such an overwhelming environment remained painful for a solitary individual like Wright who doggedly intended to preserve and defend his individual self. Since no physical means was available for him, he deported his war on individual dispossession to the field of writing. In this field, one can see the dichotomy between the individual and collective spheres in Wright's life and literary career through the protest novel. In terms of protest writing, however, it should be noted that Wright was not the only writer interested in protest literature. His protest writing was the product of long-standing American tradition which started just after the Revolutionary War and spread through American literary history until Wright's era. That is why one cannot understand Wright's protest writing without taking a primary look into the whole American protest writing tradition from which he emerged with his own black protest novel. Therefore, to better understand this rebellious and non-conformist style as well as his fighting techniques against his oppressive environment, this section will examine, first and foremost, North American protest writing. This will logically lead, then, to probing the way Wright positioned and shaped his own sharp edge weapon. It will be shown how the individual was enhanced and took a major place in Wright's style. The writer's celebration of the individual and his rights to stand free from any racial and/or racist community had much to do with the existentialist philosophy that he embraced during his stay in France. That is why this section will finally highlight the existentialistic ideas lying behind Wright's race-less worldview.

## 1. Protest Literature: The Most American Form of Literature

In a broader sense, all literary works of art can be said to be protest works as they are ultimately aimed to provoke a given change in society. From a deconstructionist point of view, however, social protest literature specifically targets essential aspects of life such as political, psychological and socio-economic relationships. John Stauffer defines it as, “a catalyst, guide or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspects of society, but also suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society’s ills” (Stauffer xii). At the political level, the protest novel aims at changing a law which is discriminatory or not beneficial to all citizens. It also aims at influencing political decisions in a sense of improving governance or deconstructing the social order in order to reconstruct more egalitarian relationship between the various social classes. At the psychological level, social protest writing may also be the result of the writer’s subconscious manifestation of resistance to psychological factors which negatively impact his inner life. At the socio-economic level, the protest novel endeavors, through thought-provoking language and plots, to raise public consciousness to social and economic injustices at national or international levels. That protest writing has become a whole writing tradition in the United States is an interesting matter to probe.

Protest created the United States, which makes sense in the protesting writings of early American writers and their descendants. Indeed, the New World had long been colonized from the 1490s until 1775 when the country became independent from the Crown following violent protests. This event, however, did not mark the end of protest. After the Declaration of Independence, American literary society was characterized by protest writings dealing with various subjects ranging from slavery, poverty, corruption, violence against women and black people, to American capitalistic exploitative system. Indeed, the promotion of outrageous liberalism plunged American society into social Darwinism in which the richest crushed the poorest through fierce competition that American law could no longer control. As a result, Americans witnessed the emergence of a very wealthy bourgeoisie and at the same time that of a very poor proletariat which lived in precarious and highly risky working conditions in industries without social protection. As Alicia Renfroe reports,

Despite active labor federations and protest, such as The Railroad Strike in 1877 and the Pullman Strike in 1894, many workers earned low wages for working long hours in dangerous conditions, [only to fall in] the growing gap between the haves and the have nots. (Renfroe 426).

While some went on strikes to protest against inequalities, others ventured into protest literature to represent social injustices in the world of fiction in order to bring about changes in real life. A number of white writers marked American protest writing tradition, namely the leading transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) who marked civil disobedience with his eponymous essay in 1849 which influenced Martin Luther King's political ideas. His style and ideas also influenced Wright. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Dreiser and Henry Louis Mencken, are other writers Wright drew inspiration from<sup>85</sup>. As Zoe Trodd puts it, American protest writers,

recognize the failed promises of the democratic experiment and explore the contradiction of what is and what ought to be through a critique of the American founding documents [...]. Thus protest literature gives distinctive shape to long-accumulated grievances, claims old rights and demands new ones. (Trodd in Renfroe 427).

Civil disobedience writing was initially developed by Thoreau who was the embodiment of the American protest tradition which inspired future generations of protest writers, Wright included. A staunch supporter of American transcendentalism, Thoreau celebrated the freedom of the individual from all forms of slavery in a combination of romantic and reformist model. He published many poems and essays in which he vigorously criticized the American social, political and judicial system which continued to legalize slavery and colonize other nations like Mexico. "Civil Disobedience" is considered the manifesto of American protest writing and, therefore, the essay received a great echo during Wright's period when the civil rights movement was taking its initial foregrounds in the black protest writing he initiated. Just like Thoreau who thought that "Under a government which imprisoned any unjustly, the true place for a just man was also a prison" (Thoreau 1849), Wright encouraged his characters to civil disobedience even if some of them ended up perishing in prison as is the case with Bigger in *Native Son*. Wright's protest writing is very similar to Thoreau's, especially in its valuation of the individual by celebrating him rather than the masses, but also in his appraisal of emotion rather than reason, of nature rather than man, though Wright put more importance on reason. Like Thoreau's transcendentalism, Wright was convinced that every social reform begins with the individual, not the group or community. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) also influenced Wright who adapted protest writing with his *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938)

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<sup>85</sup> To keep in line with Wright's protest writing, I deem it necessary to analyze only the writers who are known to have got significant influence on him and his writing style. In this respect, Henry David Thoreau, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Dreiser and Henry Louis Mencken are the main writers I will focus upon, in relation to Wright's style.

which is clearly an answer to Beecher Stowe's story and her main character, considered by literary critics the example of African Americans selling out to whites. Stowe's depiction of motherhood and Christian love, both associated with slavery, are themes taken over and adapted by Wright in *Uncle Tom's Children*.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) was the first female white American to come up with a clear-cut protest novel. Her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was first published in 1852. The novel questions the American judicial system which strengthened slavery through the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Stowe posed the debate on the contradiction between the unjust law of the nation and that of the Supreme Law, namely that of God. For her, the Supreme Law was above human laws and offered the citizen the possibility to transgress human laws as long as they did not conform to the Supreme Law. In Chapter 9, titled "In Which It Appears That a Senator Is But a Man," a specific scene illustrates Stowe's protest vision. In Ohio, a discussion unfolds between Mr. Bird, the Ohio Senator, and Mary Bird, his wife. Mr. Bird is reluctant to receiving a fugitive slave into his home and even thinks of bringing him back to the South to hand him over to his former master in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Law which he voted for as a Senator. However, his wife protests vigorously:

Now John, I want to know if you think such law as that is right and Christian. [...] You ought to be ashamed, John! Poor, homeless, houseless creatures! It's shameful, wicked, abominable law, and I'll break it, for one, the first time I get a chance; and I hope I shall get a chance, I do. Things have got to a pretty pass, if a woman can't give a warm supper and a bed to poor, starving creatures, just because they are slaves, and have been abused and oppressed all their lives, poor things! I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible. [...] And that Bible I mean to follow. (Stowe 114-115)

This scene sums up well Stowe's protest against the United States' legal system which forbade people to host fugitive slaves in their houses. One can see that Mrs. Bird relies on her Bible to promise she will break the law which is contrary to the Divine Will. She has entered a form of civil disobedience which consists in disobeying unjust laws. The scene takes place in Ohio in the Senator's house, which gives a realistic and even naturalistic colors to the narrative. In fact, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a typical social protest novel making use of realism and naturalism (Renfroe 128). Despite its commercial success, Stowe's protest novel was criticized at a time when protest literature as a whole was badly viewed in America where people preferred romanticism and sentimentalism to political protest. As Renfroe corroborates, "Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [...] is a bestseller, social protest fiction has been a neglected genre in American literary studies, often criticized for being too political and didactic" (Renfroe 438).

Notwithstanding these criticisms against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Frank Norris insists on its importance:

It is the complaint of the coward, this cry against the novel with a purpose, because it brings the tragedies and griefs of others to notice. Take this element from fiction, take from it the power and opportunity to prove that injustice, crime, and inequality do exist, and what is left? Just you amusing novel that entertain. (Norris 32)

It is clear then: protest literature was not meant to entertain, but to shake off the various injustices from society, and Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not an exception to that rule as she castigated the legal principles of slavery through civil disobedience.

Upton Beall Sinclair Jr. (1878-1968) was one of the outstanding and daring social protest writers in the American literary history. In *Jungle* (1906), he indicted the capitalistic system and its inhuman working conditions in Chicago where he revealed how the toiling masses were poorly paid. No matter how much wealth the workers produced, their wages remained stable while the holders of the means of production targeted skyrocketing profit. Sinclair's protest novel model was against art for art's sake and this principle guided most of the post-Harlem Renaissance writers including Wright. From Sinclair's own words, "The proletarian writer is a writer with purpose; he thinks no more of art for art's sake than a man on a sinking ship thinks of painting a beautiful picture of the cabin" (Sinclair 594). To embark the reader in the feeling of empathy and protest, Sinclair made use of poignant and straightforward language to describe in the slightest details, the working conditions of the toiling masses, as his following *Jungle* scene shows:

Your hands are slippery, and your knife is slippery, and you are toiling like mad, when somebody happens to speak to you, or you strike a bone. Then your hands slip up on the blade, and there is a fearful gash. And that would not be so bad, only for the deadly contagion. Then cut may heal but you never can tell [...]. There are learned people who can tell you out of the statistics that beef-boners make forty cents an hour, but, perhaps, these people have never looked into a beef-bones hands. (Sinclair, 2003)

In the capitalistic society that Sinclair denounces here, people work in risky conditions where they are under pressure and can get wounded without any boss ever being concerned with their wounds. The same situation is found in Wright's *Black Boy* where a black worker gets wounded at work but the boss just plays it down saying "a dog bite can't hurt a nigger" (*BB*, 180).

In the capitalistic system that Sinclair pictures in *Jungle*, even children are made to work for their family's survival, just as Wright's protagonist in *Black Boy* abandons school and takes a job to support his family. The Chicago meat-packing industry that Sinclair pitifully depicts shakes the American economic, legal and political systems which fail to close the gap between American citizens. Even unions that are supposed to support workers are portrayed as corrupt

by Sinclair because they exploit poor workers' desperate situations to promote their own causes just as Communist Max will use Bigger's case in *Native Son* to promote the image of his party.

Sinclair, just as previous protest writers like Beecher Stowe, was criticized for his propaganda literature which raised awareness but failed to trigger social change. As a result, a few protest writers decided to embrace a quite new variant of the protest style. After Sinclair, a movement of writers came up with the utopian protest novel such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Forward* (1888) and William Dean Howells's *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907). Because protest literature generally failed to trigger radical social change, utopian protest writers created their own fictional world where they made their dreams of the perfect society come true, which is the overall characteristic of this variant. As Renfroe wrote, "Unlike Davis, Sinclair and others who showcase contemporary issues through vivid descriptions of the real world, utopians invented a new world, that improved on the ills of the present-day reality; both forms called for change and invited readers to imagine new forms of social organization" (Renfroe 435). Inspired by these characteristics, Wright drew a bit from the utopian protest fiction through Bigger who wants to become a pilot in a social system where such a goal can but be a mere dream. However, Wright shows that utopia cannot solve the problem as Bigger ends up being sentenced to death. He preferred, instead, realism or naturalism that he developed in *Black Boy* where the protagonist takes concrete responsibility to change his situation just as John Steinbeck encouraged.

American writer John Steinbeck was another influential protest writer. He was born on 27 February 1902 in Salinas and died on 20 December 1968 in New York. As he initially spent his time as a manual laborer, he wrote on his own experience dealing with the difficult living conditions of workers. He wrote around twenty fictional works but his most well-known fiction is *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) which won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1940. It is in this novel that his protest vision of the social establishment became clearer as it depicts the migration of a dispossessed family from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression and their subsequent exploitation by a ruthless system of agricultural economy. In a few words, Elisabeth Bouzonviller approaches *The Grapes of Wrath* as "The rhythm of a walk, the almost military walk of a protean group"<sup>86</sup> (Bouzonviller 27). Steinbeck was an amazing master of language which he used in his works to describe the prevailing American social system in a way that brings about the reader's questioning of the capitalistic system based on the exploitation of poor hands in favor of the holders of the means of production. It is exactly

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<sup>86</sup> « Le rythme d'une marche, le déplacement quasi militaire d'un groupe protéiforme, c'est ainsi que l'on pourrait appréhender cette œuvre. »

his naturalistic address of proletarian issues and the ongoing social stratification occurring in American society, which extended the gap between the rich and the poor, that earned him national and even international fame. Steinbeck's naturalistic language style and his blatant depiction of social inequalities certainly inspired Wright's protest novel genre as he read *The Grapes of Wrath* for his wife Ellen and discussed it at length, and later tied relations with Steinbeck whose personal experience was close to Wright's. Wright's writing style is close to Steinbeck's to such an extent that he can be considered "the black Steinbeck." Just as Steinbeck "proposes a puzzle and avoids the straight line"<sup>87</sup> (Bouzonviller 32), so did Wright as he refused to take shortcuts by just conforming to his alienating environment, a position which was strengthened by his encounter with Theodore Dreiser.

Although Wright drew enough from Steinbeck in his protest writing, it should be noted that Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) was one of the most influential white protest writers who had a powerful impact on Wright and other younger writers. He was born to a large family of ten children who were dispersed due to the economic hardships of their families to earn a living. This is how Dreiser found himself at the age of fifteen in the city of Chicago where employment problems forced him to devote himself to menial works such as diving, laundry and railway work. His life later took a new direction when he successfully entered the field of journalism, which enabled him to approach Chicago city life with objectivity and lucidity. Just after his arrival in the journalistic sphere of Chicago, his first impressions revealed his future inclination to ignite protest writing which castigated several segments of American society such as politics, religion and economics:

Politics, as I quickly discovered, was a nice game; religion as to its principles and its followers, a horrible illusion based on noise and fury and meaningless; trade was a relentless war in which the less clever and the less rapid, or the less strong succumbed and or the cleverer succeeded. In the liberal professions, we found a bunch of shabby, mediocre or mercenaries ready to be sold to the highest bidder. (Dreiser, 1976, 367)

These impressions were probably inspired by the very personal experience of the writer who, arriving very young in Chicago, went through all the stages and emotions linked to the economic dispossession brought about by exploitative capitalism and religious alienation. Journalistic work formed the basis of Dreiser's writing in a way to become one of the greatest pioneers of protest writing in the United States by approaching society and the relationships between individuals from a sociological point of view. One of his flagship works to this day remains *Sister Carrie* published in 1900. In Dreiser's protest writing, form and content went

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<sup>87</sup> « [il] propose un puzzle et évite la ligne droite. »

hand in hand. Speaking of form, the language used is straightforward and the content is socially deep since it sinks into mainstream American way of life to unearth the social flaws that litter the streets of Chicago.

In his protest writing philosophy, Dreiser did not beat around the bush to openly criticize American urban society. Be it in *Sister Carrie*, *The Financier* or *American Tragedy*, the observation and criticism of society remained the same and are summarized by Saint-Arnaud as follows:

The capitalistic social order exalts the essential qualities for economic success alone and makes the captain of industry the ideal human type; the latter only feels indifferent to the misfortune of those who are crushed by the system, the rich not having to show any commiseration towards the underprivileged and the fallen of society. [...] Worst tragedy of all is that of the totally disinherited of the big city (and they are legion compared to the wealthy who have succeeded), in distress because stuck in the insoluble contradiction between a deep need for utility and dignity and an objective inability to adjust to the insurmountable demands of urban life, a personality completely dissociated and dislocated in a social universe offering no way out<sup>88</sup>. (Saint-Arnaud 26)

Dreiser's criticism of American urban life was not articulated in romantic sentimentalism or in religious subjectivism. On the contrary, his uncompromising social realism, sharp and provocative language spared neither law nor jurists who were supposed to guarantee equality between individuals. This is made clear in his *Financier* where he blatantly complains:

[...] The law became a sword and a shield, a trap to slip under the footsteps of the reckless, a trapdoor to dig on the road of those who could complain. It was all we wanted to do with it: a door opening to all possible inequalities; a cloud of dust to throw into the eyes of those who could choose and see right; a veil to be drawn arbitrarily between the truth and its practice, justice and its sentence, crime and its punishment; as a whole the lawyers are intellectual mercenaries ready to be bought or to be sold to defend any cause. (Dreiser 328)

As can be seen through Dreiser's words, language is used as a whip to shake all social, religious, economic, political and even judicial circles without exception. This language is straightforward and conveys exactly what the author thinks and sees, because as Dreiser himself contended, art is "the expression of what we see honestly and without subterfuge, because such

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<sup>88</sup> « L'ordre social capitaliste exalte les qualités indispensables à la seule réussite économique et fait du capitaine d'industrie le type humain idéal, celui-ci n'éprouve qu'indifférence devant l'infortune de ceux qui sont écrasés par le système, les riches n'ayant à faire preuve d'aucune commisération envers les déshérités et les déçus de la société. [...] Pire tragédie de toutes, celle du déshérité total de la grande ville (et ils sont légion comparativement aux riches qui ont réussi), en détresse parce que coincés dans la contradiction insoluble entre un besoin profond d'utilité et de dignité et une incapacité objective à s'adapter aux insurmontables exigences de la vie urbaine, personnalité complètement dissociée et disloquée dans un univers social sans issue. »



is morality, such is also art” (Dreiser in Becker 29). In this respect, Dreiser’s naturalistic protest writing style commanded that the novelist had to describe facts in a straightforward language and as they were heard, seen or lived, be they ugly or beautiful. In this sense, the writer had to become a journalist reporter for whom facts were stubborn and sacred. This way of shaping literature had an impact on a large number of black writers like Wright who was very strongly inspired by Dreiser’s style to the point of becoming the very first Black American pioneer of the genre. Though White protest writers also influenced Wright, however, he succeeded in crafting an original black protest style of his own.

## 2. Wright’s Shaping of the Black Protest Novel

Although Wright drew from previous American literary protest tradition, one should not be mistaken. His black protest novel is quite different and unique as it is the first genre crafted by a black writer in a straightforward, realistic and unambiguous language and which focuses, at the same time, on racial relations and Blacks’ decaying social lives. Wright proposed a pragmatic depiction of what really happened in Blacks’ lives, not a stereotypical vision. Having acquired a mastery of writing inspired by Dostoevsky, Zola, Steinbeck and Dreiser, “we were already far from Wright’s awkward beginnings. Capable of writing with passion, he had learned to do it with precision, using an approach that was by no means instinctive”<sup>89</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 96). Of course, no instinctive force can help an artist to produce masterpieces like Wright’s novels. On the contrary, Wright used various sources to create his works of art or one could say, he connected with multiplicities to achieve his own creation, a kind of creation which killed the “I” identity as a sole individual to represent all the dispossessed people. It appears important to remark, then, that Wright’s artistic creation is neither ordinary nor extraordinary but simply a particular one corresponding to Deleuze’s definition of literary creation:

To create is to produce lines and figures of differentiation, [...] a de-subjectification [which is] not reaching the point where we no longer say “I”, but where it does not matter any longer to say “I” or not. We are no longer ourselves. [...] We have been helped, aspired, multiplied. [It is] an abolition of the alienated form in which the individual is built as a subject, in favor of a subjectification without subjugation<sup>90</sup>. (Deleuze, 1968, 328; Deleuze, Gattari 1976, 7)

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<sup>89</sup> « On était déjà loin des balbutiements maladroits de Wright. Capable d’écrire avec passion, il apprit à le faire avec précision, selon une démarche qui n’avait rien d’instinctif. »

<sup>90</sup> « Créer, c’est produire des lignes et des figures de différenciation, [...] une dé-subjectivation [qui n’est] non pas en arriver au point où l’on ne dit plus « je », mais au point où ça n’a plus aucune importance de dire ou de ne pas

From a Deleuzian perspective, minorities' artistic creation branches with various sources and models but makes a difference by building characters who are no longer alienated subjects. They do not get lost as subjects but merge with other subjects to create a multiplicity of subjects standing together as one. In such circumstances, there is no more "I the white person" or "I the black person" but rather "we the people". It becomes clear from such a process of artistic creation where the "I" becomes the "we" that Wright aimed at a deep social transformation permitting Blacks and Whites to stand on an equal footing. To reach such a great objective, Wright sometimes did not spare straightforward language. His linguistic anger, his straightforward and provocative language against oppression are usually displayed in his various works of art as is the case in *Black Boy*:

But what in other ways had the South allowed me to be natural, to be real, to be myself, except in rejection, rebellion, and aggression? Not only had the southern whites not known me, but, more important still, as I had lived in the South I had not had a chance to learn who I was [...]. I had been what my surrounding had demanded, what my family, conforming to the dictates of the whites above them, had exacted of me, and what the whites had said that I must be. (*BB*, 284)

Wright's protest novel largely diverts from classical novels tackling social scourges to become a purely political weapon against lingering social discrimination and political exclusion. It is clearly identifiable through its characters, specifically its protagonist, the specific issues addressed, and the particular language used to address them.

Characterization is essential in Wright's protest novel model. Most of the time, his characters are strong-tempered, stubborn, and disrespectful of established authority or norms, which certainly has a link with Wright's non-conformist personality shaped by an environment of alienation, conflicts and protests. The protagonist of the black protest novel, though sometimes showing some evidence of social insecurity and inferiority, does not balk at these difficulties. He is rather willful, self-assured in his daily actions and ready to cope with all the troubles that his attitude in society can entail. The protagonist is always shown in conflict with racial norms and poverty, with his community's propensity to self-acceptance as a minor race, or with patriarchal social and cultural norms. Wright's protagonist rejects learned inferiority as a false notion which is only a view of the mind and moves beyond any restriction on his individual stance to take the upper hand on not only discrimination but also on all those who

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dire « je ». Nous ne sommes plus nous-mêmes. [...] Nous avons été aidés, aspirés, multipliés. [C'est] un abolissement de la forme aliénée sous laquelle l'individu est constitué en sujet, au profit d'une subjectivation sans assujettissements. »

attempt to break his self-expression. This can be seen in *Native Son* where the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, challenges a racial taboo which prevents Blacks from any sexual contact with Whites and satisfies his own desire by abusing his white boss's daughter, Mary Dalton. Taking advantage of Mary's drunkenness, "he lifted her and laid her on the bed [...], excited, looking at her face in the dim light, not wanting to take his hands from her breasts, he tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him" (*NS*, 80). In *Black Boy*, although racial stereotypical presuppositions strive to keep Blacks away from knowledge, Richard challenges these prevailing norms and commits the crime of secret reading as can be seen through the library scene:

'You're not using these books, are you?' She said pointedly.  
Oh God, she's suspicious. Perhaps she would not let me have the books.  
'Oh, no, ma'am. I can't read,' I said.  
[...] She went to the shelves. Once or twice she looked over her shoulder at me, as though she was still doubtful. Finally, she came forward with two books in her hand [...]. Not daring to glance at them, I went out of the library, fearing that the woman would call me back for further questioning. A block away from the library I opened one of the books and read a title: *A Book of Prefaces*. (*BB*, 270-271)

This scene presents the fact that reading leads Blacks into self-awareness and opposition. Thus, Whites endeavor to keep them from reading committed writers such as Dreiser and Mencken. To get access to the books in the library, Richard is obliged to borrow a library card from a white friend, Mr. Falk, to play the fool and lie to the librarian. All these events are closely intertwined with Wright's personal life who, as a young boy, was used to confronting people and interiorizing his inferiority which turns into violence.

Violence is ubiquitous in Wright's protest novels as it reflects probably his own self, but also that of the black community as Fabre suggests:

Perhaps Wright's complexes and his habit of perceiving relationships with others as confrontational were due to a lack of self-confidence. Perhaps the awareness of being poor and fatherless, and therefore different from other children, formed the basis of this inferiority which was sometimes expressed in violence, sometimes in paralysis<sup>91</sup>. (Fabre, 1986, 20)

Violence is portrayed not only as a political issue but more importantly as a cultural one. It had become inherent in American culture in which oppressors remained oppressive and oppressed people ended up accepting it as a normal cultural pattern. Not only did Wright bitterly condemn

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<sup>91</sup> « Peut-être les complexes de Wright et son habitude de ressentir les rapports avec autrui comme un affrontement sont-ils dus à un manque de confiance en soi. Peut-être la conscience d'être pauvre et sans père, donc différent des autres enfants, forme-t-elle la base de cette infériorité qui s'extériorise tantôt dans la violence, tantôt dans la paralysie. »

racism, which was partly the origin of violence, but he also criticized Blacks as being responsible for the perpetuation of violence against them by remaining passive. Through his protest novel, Wright intended to trigger a “new generation of Blacks who will no longer turn the other cheek and submit to white harassment as their parents has done so far” (Levin 136). On the contrary, they would resist violence and use every means at their disposal to respond to it. This can be understood through *Native Son* where Bigger kills Mary as an unconscious response to racism, and through *Uncle Tom’s Children* as the following excerpt shows:

Wes been waiting too long! All we do is wait, *wait!* Ahma git mah gun n git Pete n Bob n Joe n Sam! They’ll see they cant do this t us! [...]. They were crowded around her. She had not moved since she had taken her place in the doorway [...]. The sheriff slapped her straight across her face with his open palm. She fell back against a wall and sank to her knees [...]. She rose slowly and stood again, not even touching the place that ached from his blow, her hands folded over her stomach [...]. He slapped her again; she reeled backward several feet and fell on her side [...]. She stood before him again, dry-eyed, as though she had not been struck [...]. She was consumed with pride [...]. Taking the sheet from her apron, she wrapped a gun in it so that her finger could be upon the trigger. (*UTC*, 169,196, 197, 207)

In the context of racial competition, contrary to many writers, Blacks’ violence is not portrayed by Wright as a moral decay but as a legitimate tool for the characters to fight for survival. In *Black Boy*, violence is present in Richard’s life from Mississippi to Chicago. However, such violence, instead of transforming Richard into a rough beast, teaches him how to hold himself in a violent environment. “I was rapidly learning to contain the tension I felt in my relations with whites, and people in Memphis [...]. I could stand more mental strain than formerly or I had discovered deep within me ways of handling it” (*BB*, 245), Richard admits.

Violence in Wright’s protest fiction is usually judged not according to its nature but to its purpose. For instance, when Bigger sexually abuses, kills and burns the white girl in *Native Son*, he is sentenced to death. Even though killing by sexual abuse or by death sentence are both forms of violence, death sentence is a legal violence as it stems from the American judicial process. Yet Wright cleverly condemns Bigger’s death sentence as an act of racial hatred while subtly finding attenuating circumstances for his crime as a sub-conscious resistance to a racially-motivated social convention, “a pre-ordained pattern set upon the living reality of Blacks” (Charney 69). For Wright, Bigger’s crime and his subsequent sentence to death are racially-motivated, as he accounts for Bigger’s thoughts:

Bigger felt a wild and outlandish conviction surge in him: They [Blacks] ought to be glad! It was a strange but strong feeling, springing from the very depths of his life. Had he not fully taken upon him the crime of being black? Had he not done the thing they dreaded above all others? Then they ought not stand here and pity him, cry over him;

but look at him and go home, contended, feeling that their shame was washed away. (NS, 233)

What is more, book three of *Native Son* is entitled “fate” as though to suggest that Bigger has no control over his actions, which commands attenuating circumstances in his favor.

The most commonly identifiable trait of Wright’s protagonists in his protest novels is non-conformism to racial authority and socio-cultural alienating conventions. That is why they always find themselves in individual-versus-society situations wherein they have to come to terms with racial segregation, poverty, and social rejection, probably because Wright had thorough experience of these situations from childhood to adulthood, as Kenneth Kinnamon argues: “The four basic facts of his [Wright’s] youth which contributed to the molding of this personality were his racial status, poverty, the disruption of his family life and his faulty education” (Kinnamon 2). Richard Kostelanetz goes further, insisting that, “his life itself was marked by a series of rejections, first of the American South, then of the Northern cities, then of communism, then of America itself, then perhaps of expatriation” (Kostelanetz 7).

The protest novel has very little in common with the classical or primitive novels which dominated the black literary sphere of the 1920s and 1930s. While the primitive novelists overlook social protest through literature and focused more on black cultural beauty, W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston for instance, Wright’s protest novel takes a different direction, considering primitivism as a false leap forward. It sets out to show that it is not by turning a blind eye to Blacks’ intra-racial flaws that they could find a way out of their racial predicament. It is rather their realistic analysis of their own weaknesses which will permit them to identify the best ways of eradicating discrimination in America. Wright’s protest novel is not against black cultural propaganda promoted by W.E.B. Du Bois and like-minded artists; it simply intends to bring novelty to the struggle for racial equality. It is another literary method which provides Blacks with a mirror to look at their own cultural flaws such as religious alienation combined with violence which keep them away from self-awakening and impinge on their own individual and collective emancipation, as evidenced in *Black Boy*:

There were more quarrels in our deeply religious home than in the home of a gangster, a burglar, or a prostitute, a fact which I used to hint gently to Granny and which did my cause no good. Granny bore the standard for God, but she was always fighting us. Granny and Aunt Addie quarreled over minor points of religious doctrine, or over some imagined infraction of what they chose to call their moral code. Whenever I found religion in my life I found strife, the attempt of one individual or a group to rule another in the name of God. (BB, 150)

John Reilly, who wrote the afterword of *Black Boy*, goes further to assert that, “Wright sees his entire culture acting to discourage him from understanding. School gives him no knowledge about Negroes, and his classmates laugh off his efforts to get the whole picture of their lives” (*BB*, 257). Yet Wright was determined to make his protest understood.

To make his protest understood, the pioneer of the black protest novel spares romantic language, sometimes full of difficultly-understandable aesthetic patterns, and adopts a plain, realistic language in an almost journalistic style. While romantic language is highly connotative, the language used by Wright in his protest novel is very close to denotative meaning, the objective of which is to spare the reader from digging deep into his brain to make sense of the message, and to reach him. That is why the chosen language is sometimes provocative not only to white but also to black readers with a view to shocking them, as it is shown in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Black Boy* wherein respectively, Sue and Richard make use of provocative language to convey their messages, which earns them physical violence. “Yu ain never heped yo own sef since yuh been born. How can the likes of yuh hep me?” (*UTC*, 194), Sue spits at the sheriff, which results in the latter “slapping her straight across her face with his open palm” (*UTC*, 195). “When you get through, kiss back there [his anus]” (*BB*, 49), Richard tells his grandmother Granny while she is washing him in the bathroom, which results in her “lifting the wet towel high above her head and bringing it down across [his] naked back with all the outraged fury of her sixty-old-year body, leaving an aching streak of fire burning and quivering on [his] skin” (*BB*, 50). These two scenes reveal the importance of language in Wright’s protest novels as it enables the speaker, in a shocking manner, to get his message across even though such a language sometimes can result in dire consequences.

Language is particularly important in Wright’s protest writing as he even shows it all through the plot of the three novels under study. After reading H.L. Mencken, Wright himself accounted for his feeling about language:

I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate. [...] Yes this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. [...] I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it. (Wright in Levin 137)

In fact, Wright discovered that language was a powerful tool, a weapon not only to protest against injustice but also to foster self-consciousness in a context of racial competition. In *Black Boy*, when Richard’s father asks him to “kill that damn thing [their cat]” (*BB*, 17), he literally

obeys. Although he knows killing the cat is not what his father really wants, he does it, and by the same opportunity, gains authority on his father as he cannot punish him without calling his own authority into question. Richard therefore uses the interpretation of language to win the moral battle against his father.

Richard's discussion with his father is suggestive of Wright's proximity with the Derridean concept of fragmentation arguing that language is so slippery and fragmented in terms of meaning that one cannot use a one-way process to understand it. As Derrida (1967) speaks of the complexity of language, it is "a complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which enables the different threads and different lines of meaning, or of force, to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others" (9). This stance corroborates Guattari and Deleuze's perception of language as a set of rhizomes de-territorializing themselves through lines of flight to connect with other rhizomes in a principle of connection and heterogeneity (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987, 7). In this respect, it is sometimes the reader who gives the language a meaning which the author himself ignores, as Wright himself argues in "How Bigger Was Born": "I am not so pretentious as to imagine that it is possible to account completely for my own book, *Native Son* [...]. There will be many things I shall omit, not because I want to, but because I don't know them" (NS, 330). Actually, the things that Wright admits not knowing are the various meanings provided by his readers as Derridean supplements.

Richard's discussion with his father is also a subtle critic of classical romanticism to make language as clear as possible for it to get its intended message across, which is characteristic of Wright's protest novel genre. That is why, even when Wright sometimes made use of symbolic language, he carefully crafted it as closely as possible to the reality of the targeted audience to make its understanding easier for them. For instance, Wright sometimes used straightforward vernacular English so as to target black folks. Because the majority of Blacks in the first half of the 20th century was illiterate, they used vernacular English to communicate as it was easier than Standard English which was seen as the prerogative of highly educated people and of Whites. By making use of vernacular English, Wright intended to reflect as closely as possible the reality of the black community so as to get his message across. The same type of language was also used by Langston Hughes, for instance, who broke away from Standard English suggested by the advocates of elitist literature in favor of the vernacular, to mirror the reality of Blacks. This technique is visible in *Uncle Tom's Children* as this excerpt, where Sue talks to the sheriff, reveals: "Ah ast yuh t git outta mah house! Ah ain never seen

one of yo kind tha wuznt too low fer” (*UTC*, 194, 195). Wright’s protest writing was the result of his abhorrence of individual dispossession and of race, which, to him, was at the heart of the process of deprivation. This led him to nourish existentialistic thoughts so as to promote a raceless worldview of human relations.

### 3. Wright’s Existential Raceless View

It is in France that Wright’s reaction against individual and collective dispossession reached its climax. As an American exile, some of his writings castigated the deprivation of Blacks more virulently. The trauma of his own dispossession was so great that rebellion or non-conformism became part of his personality. Even as a refugee or exile, he did not hesitate to support the fight of Africans to end colonialism in which his host country was involved. Right after arriving in France, he continued to write and fight for his rights as an individual. His thirst for individual freedom led him to espouse the existentialist ideas of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus to stay away from any place where the collective tended to undermine his individual sovereignty as was the case with Richard, the protagonist of *Black Boy*.

Albert Camus and John Paul Sartre’s existentialist ideology seduced Wright to such an extent that his novel *The Outsider* (1953) took strong existentialist colorations. In fact, *The Outsider* stands as an evidence of Wright’s total change of philosophy. Though in *Uncle Tom Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* he still believed in communism in spite of his criticism of some of its derailments, *The Outsider* is a total shift from Marxism to Sartre’s existentialism, the basic principle of which is summed up in his article “Existentialism Is Humanism”:

Man is the possessor of human nature; this human nature, which is the human concept, is found in all men, which means that each man is a particular example of a universal concept, Man [...]. Man is not only as he conceives himself, but also as he wants to be, and as he sees himself after existence, as he wants to be after this impetus towards existence, man is nothing other than what he makes for himself. This is the first principle of existentialism<sup>92</sup>. (Sartre, 1996, 3)

While communism values community control over the individual, existentialism, as illustrated above by Sartre, advocates for the free choice of the individual in society, which was more compatible with Wright’s personality. That is why, in *The Outsider*, communism is laughed at

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<sup>92</sup> « L’homme est possesseur d’une nature humaine ; cette nature humaine, qui est le concept humain, se retrouve chez tous les hommes, ce qui signifie que chaque homme est un exemple particulier d’un concept universel, l’homme. [...] L’homme est non seulement tel qu’il se conçoit, mais tel qu’il se veut, et comme il se conçoit après l’existence, comme il se veut après cet élan vers l’existence, l’homme n’est rien d’autre que ce qu’il se fait. Tel est le premier principe de l’existentialisme. »



through the characterization of the protagonist named Damon. The latter also commits a crime but does it as a result of free and individual choice, while Bigger in *Native Son* does it because of society's negative influence on him. The title *Outsider* is suggestive of the fact that Wright's characters in this novel, contrary to those in *Native Son*, live outside any alienating social rules or code of conduct even though such an attitude isolates them from their communities.

Though Wright was isolated from his community by the hostile political system of his home country, he continued to carry political messages through his writing. To a certain extent, he became an individualistic or a solitary writer as he was de-territorialized away from his community. Nevertheless, his individual literary anti-oppression message can be considered as that of voiceless communities experiencing oppression, if one considers Deleuze and Guattari's comment:

What the solitary writer says already constitutes a communal action, and what he says or does is necessarily political, even if others do not agree with him. The political field [...] contaminates all [his] statement, especially [his] literature which finds itself charged with role and function of the collective, and even revolutionary utterance because the collective or national consciousness is often inactive. (Deleuze, Guattari, 1983, 17)

If Wright as a solitary writer stands for the community and his utterance influenced the national consciousness, therefore, it can be said his life fully took an existentialist direction. This new direction in his life, however, was not the result of haphazard occurrence. Rather, it was closely linked to his encounter with the French existentialists Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

The relationship between Wright, Sartre and Camus sounds like a natural attraction. He had been disappointed with the anti-intellectualism that segregationists and his own community members promoted against him but also by the intellectual dictatorship of the pro-Soviet communists who tried to control all his standpoints. That was certainly what provided his attraction to Sartre and Camus its whole meaning. Fabre goes so far as to contend that "Wright held an existential view of life long before he had even heard the word "existentialism" (Fabre, 1978, 39). The existentialist theory advocated by Sartre and Camus, namely the need for the individual to de-territorialize himself from all forms of collective alienation in order to determine himself by his free will, surely appeared as another original path which corresponded to Wright's personal convictions about freedom. That is why Wright soon got along with Sartre and Camus after reading Camus's *Crisis of Man* (1946), *The Plague* (1947) and *The Outsider* (1942). Although he did not necessarily like Camus's gentle and moderate style too much, Wright was interested in his existentialist perspective just as he was in Sartre's.

Wright's relationship with Sartre was also facilitated by his prior knowledge of his thought. Before meeting Sartre, he was already acquainted with *The Phenomenological Psychology of Imagination* (1936), *Being and Nothingness* (1943), and *Existentialism Is Humanism* (1946). The latter work strengthened Wright's distance from collective religions in favor of atheistic humanism which denounces the negative role of materialism in extending the gaps between individuals and nations and the capitalistic consumerism which plunges human beings into the search for gain at all costs. It is also the solidarity displayed by Sartre with the oppressed and colonized peoples which appealed to Wright, and nobody is putting words in his mouth when he declares: "Sartre is the only Frenchman I have met who was willing to identify this French experience with that from the rest of humanity. What an uncommon man! His ideas must be valid as they lead to areas of existence where man can see the truth"<sup>93</sup> (Wright in Fabre, 1986, 230). Sartre's view of the free man perfectly fits with Wright's own vision, who spent his entire life fighting against all forms of domination and oppression including American racism.

Wright's oppressive environment made him more violent and provided him an almost natural tendency to resist, and then to use violence to protect himself (Fine 92). Plato in his *Republic* makes it clear that "horses to which we do harm become worse with regard to horse virtues" just as "the humans to whom we do harm become worse with regard to human virtues" (3). Due to trauma and vulnerability, dispossessing him of his freedom and needs as a child and later as an adult, weakening and altering his personality, Wright ended up adopting rebellion as an appropriate response to all these social and economic constraints. However, his rebellion against dispossession was not only physical. Rather, it was through the use of language that he expressed his rebellion to show the disadvantageous circumstances of life as my corpus enhances. To do so, Wright made use of a minor language which according to Deleuze and Guattari must,

make the sequence vibrate, to open the word to unheard-of inner intensities, [a language which] involves a matter of becoming which instead includes the maximum of difference in intensity, the crossing of a threshold, rise or fall, sinking, or erection, accent of a word" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1986, 19).

Indeed, such a minor language, in a Deleuzean sense, can be found in *Black Boy* when Richard, in one conversation with his comrades about the dispossession inflicted by Whites, spits out: "The first sonofabitch that bothers me is gonna get a hole knocked in his head!" (BB, 90).

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<sup>93</sup> « Sartre est le seul français que j'aie rencontré qui ait bien voulu identifier cette expérience française avec celle du reste de l'humanité. Quel homme peu commun ! Ses idées doivent être valides puisqu'elles conduisent vers des domaines de l'existence où l'homme peut voir la vérité. »

Wright's rebellion began at an early age when he realized he was an individual standing against an oppressive family environment. Even though he agreed to be baptized to avoid humiliation for his mother and grandmother, he later refused to practice religion which he considered as preventing the development of his critical thinking on social issues of burning importance, which is characteristic of the Sartrean existentialist philosophy suggesting that only the individual, and not any supernatural being whatsoever, is responsible for his destiny. Wright as an individual was so severely affected by the circumstances of collective life that his rebellion appeared rather logical during adulthood. His rebellion sometimes manifested in anti-social activities as revealed by Fabre:

All things considered, Richard realized that the profits from his alcohol trafficking would not allow him to raise the hundred dollars he needed for his departure within a year. He therefore resolved to resort to theft. He felt morally free to do so, since the Whites, so to speak, had put him out of the law because of his skin color. [...] He also stole a revolver from a neighboring house, then burgled the Jackson College bursary and resold the cans to restaurants<sup>94</sup>. (Fabre, 1986, 57)

Alcohol trafficking and armed robbery were no longer perceived by Wright as illegal or immoral because he had been pushed into the margins of society and, therefore, nobody could expect him to respect the rules of a society from which he was excluded. On the contrary, Wright perceived illegal activities as a moral obligation specifically when laws became unjust.

Wright, as a black man, did not develop rebellion against a person until he understood the dynamics of race relations in the United States. Because his critical thinking developed rapidly, he realized that the worst dispossession was not only family pressure, but rather the racial issue which made of him a marginal citizen having no say in decisions affecting his own life. The worst forms of dispossession that Wright witnessed further enraged him. But knowing that rebellion would be dangerous if it were to be seen as an armed struggle or war (as advocated by Malcolm X and other like-minded Blacks), Wright deported his war into the field of literature where he became a Deleuzian war machine in the way Deleuze defined it: "a linear arrangement which is built on lines of flight. In this sense, the war machine does not have war at all as its object; its object is a very special space, a smooth space which it composes, occupies

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<sup>94</sup> « Tout bien examiné, Richard comprit que les bénéfices de son trafic d'alcool ne lui permettraient pas de réunir dans l'année la centaine de dollars indispensables à son départ. Il résolut donc de recourir au vol. Il se sentait libre, sur le plan moral, de le faire, puisque les Blancs l'avaient pour ainsi dire mis en dehors des lois à cause de sa couleur. [...] Il déroba aussi un revolver dans une maison voisine, puis cambriola l'économat de Jackson College et revendit les boîtes de conserve à des restaurants. »

and spreads”<sup>95</sup> (Deleuze, 1990, 50). *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* came out as Wright’s special spaces where he waged war against the idea of conforming to being deprived of his individuality. He advocated in these three works for a form of non-conformism which could be described as civil disobedience, and in the same vein as Thoreau, consisting in disrespecting unjust laws and the social misconceptions which had made Blacks the victims of all forms of dispossession<sup>96</sup>.

The publication period of the three works under study was a period when any non-conformist attitude toward Jim Crow laws was violently dealt with by white supremacists. In this respect, they recognized the existentialistic nature of Wright’s protest writings and took strict measures against him. As Ann Joyce quite clearly contends, “Wright wrote *Black Boy* as a response to the experiences he had been growing up as a poor black boy in America” (Joyce 47). *Black Boy* as well as *Native Son* already display existentialistic colorations as they celebrate the individual seeking to gain independence from community control. By the way, Wright’s tendency to discard himself from the community’s social, religious, and sexual control earned him discrediting campaigns as he was seen as an “anti-American, anti-Semitic, anti-Christian, overly sexual and obscene” (48). *Native Son* and *Black Boy* were viewed by a highly religious America as existentialistic because of the atheistic portrayal of the protagonists. As a result, they were initially banned from schools in some states such as New York, Louisiana, Tennessee, Nebraska and Michigan (Karolides, Bald, Sova 384-390). Realizing the extent of intellectual dispossession to which he was exposed, Wright decided to leave and find shelter in a more comfortable environment in Europe.

Wright’s second response as an individual to his intellectual dispossession by the collectivity resided in his flight to other destinations to keep, at least, his intellectual possessions. According to Ami Quayle, strategies used by the dispossessed subjects to escape “include behavioral responses such as withdrawing from or avoidance of particular places or settings that are perceived as culturally unsafe; turning off or not listening; different forms of confrontation; preparing children to survive in a racist world” (Quayle 154). Fleeing, therefore,

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<sup>95</sup> « Nous définissons la machine de guerre comme un agencement linéaire qui se construit sur des lignes de fuite. En ce sens, la machine de guerre n'a pas du tout pour objet la guerre ; elle a pour objet un espace très spécial, espace lisse, qu'elle compose, occupe et propage. »

<sup>96</sup> The concept of civil disobedience was majorly developed by Gandhi and it gained wider promotion in the United States by Thoreau who contends that because Blacks have been ruled out of the American Constitution and socio-economic system, there is no longer need for them to abide by this Constitution. Thoreau, just as Gandhi, sees civil disobedience as a moral obligation for the oppressed people to compel the dominant social group to carry out reforms for a more egalitarian society. Civil disobedience is appropriated by Wright as part of his non-conformist strategies. This strategic civil disobedience will be discussed at length later in the third part dedicated to Wright’s non-conformist handling of dispossession.

is not cowardice but a strategy to better act in a safer and free place as Deleuze puts it: “The line of flight is a de-territorialization. To flee is not to renounce actions at all, nothing is more active than a flight” (Deleuze in Bessis, 2003). In a related vein, Kouassi Johnson interestingly remarks:

The black man on the run is one of the archetypal characters in American literature. From Big-Boy in *Uncle Tom's Children* to Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, from Cross Damon in *The Outsider* to Fred Daniels in *Eight Men* [...], most heroes find their salvation in flight when oppression is unleashed or when they think they want to become themselves<sup>97</sup>. (Johnson 289)

That is the strategy used by Wright who fled the United States for France where he expressed his individual philosophy. He literally de-territorialized himself and adopted a line of flight. After his departure for Europe, one may fear, however, that the distance that henceforth separated him from the Black American reality and his new acquired freedom would permanently shut him from the black emotional, social and psychological experience, and would influence his authentic writing. However, as a line of flight, to borrow words from Bouzonviller, this migration “is chosen and oriented [and], contrary to appearances, shows that no matter the difficulties, the migrant will never be led from [America] to the West as subjugated cattle which have no choice of their route”<sup>98</sup> (Bouzonviller 30). True to his reputation, even if he had fled his home country for France, Wright refused to be led as cattle and to write like other writers and adopted existentialism as his new philosophy. That is why his first novel written in France and entitled *The Outsider* defended his newly espoused existentialist philosophy.

However, Wright's *Outsider*, like his previous novels expressing his non-conformist positioning as a protest writer put him in trouble with some fellow black writers. Baldwin particularly picked a grudge with him as he accused him of using protest writing as a means to hold the truth and to deny black life. “The failure of the protest novel,” Baldwin opines in “Everybody's Protest Novel”, “lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (Baldwin, 1949, 489). Even though Baldwin may be right to criticize Wright's lack of interest in black cultural beauty, he seems to have lost sight of the fact that

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<sup>97</sup> « Le Noir en fuite constitue d'ailleurs l'un des personnages archétypiques de la littérature américaine. De Big-Boy dans *Uncle Tom's Children* à Bigger Thomas dans *Native Son*, de Cross Damon dans *The Outsider* à Fred Daniels dans *Eight Men*, la plupart des héros trouvent leur salut dans l'évasion lorsque l'oppression se déchaîne ou lorsqu'ils s'avisent de vouloir devenir eux-mêmes. »

<sup>98</sup> « Ces vagabondages choisis et orientés, malgré les apparences, signalent que, quelles que soient les difficultés, les migrants ne seront jamais conduits d'est en ouest comme du bétail domestiqué qui n'a pas le choix de son itinéraire. »

Wright had taken this option on purpose. The fact is not really that he disregarded black cultural beauty; it is rather that he considered black socio-cultural and political predicament as more overwhelming and deserving more attention. In other words, Wright did not want to pay attention to coaches which arrived on time and were taken for granted. He intended to de-territorialize himself from the complacency of his community members and uncompromisingly depicted their reality with precision through his writing. In doing so, he can be regarded as the first Black American to describe with surgical precision and without concession the experience of Blacks in Southern and Northern United States. His presence in the black community gave him a privileged perspective as he experienced what he wrote, which allowed him to unearth the emotional and psychological roots of Blacks' lives to the eyes of the world. Although his existentialist *Outsider*, just like his previous novels, was initially criticized and relegated to the margin, this exactly served Wright's interest as a marginalized writer. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "if the writer lives on the margin, is set apart from his fragile community, this situation makes him all the abler to express another sensibility, just as the dog in the Investigations speaks in his solitude of another science" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1983, 17). So said, marginalization gave Wright another opportunity to trigger a new consciousness from his position and convince other people and his readers that "the collective consciousness is often inactive in external life and [sometimes] in the process of disintegration" (17). Notwithstanding Deleuze and Guattari's suggestion, it is not always easy for the marginalized individual to convince the collectivity, most specifically when it comes to prove that race is unreal and that it is only an abstract construction.

Wright did not deny the negative role that using race as a tool for domination played in human relations. Nevertheless, it did not mean, as many of his critics believed, that all of Wright's literary works only dealt with the mere matter of race. Indeed, Wright dealt with race in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* but the question of race is particularly dealt with. His approach consists in denying the very notion of race as a biological state to argue that it is rather a product of the dominant group's imagination with the aim of dispossessing the weak. As an adult, Wright protested against the use of skin color as a means of identifying human beings and as a means used by one group to dominate others. He did not want to be identified either as a white, a mulatto, a black or yellow man, a poor or rich man, but only as a human being with reason and insight. Wright reaffirmed his raceless position in his interview with *L'Express*:

Color is not my homeland. I am a human being before being an American; I am a human being before being a black man and if I deal with racial problems, it is because these problems were created without my consent, without my permission. I am opposed to any racial definition. If I write on racial issues, it is specifically to end racial definitions. And I don't want anyone in the world we live in to take a racial view, be he/she white, black or yellow<sup>99</sup>. (Wright in *L'Express*, 2018)

Clearly put, Wright wanted to deconstruct the use of skin color, along with social, economic or political status as a means of identifying people, because this way of determining them only establishes relationships of domination and oppression which cause tension and violence. This is made clear from the three novels analyzed here. For instance, in *Uncle Tom's Children*, the separation of people based on skin color leads to discrimination and violence as is the case with two children killed by a white man for having ventured into his swimming pool and the white man Heartfield killed by a black man who has stolen his boat to save his pregnant wife from the flood (*UTC*, 28, 69). In *Native Son*, it is Bigger's identification as a poor young black boy with no future which leads him to a murderous act as he is in quest for identity as an individual in society (*NS*, 233).

While Whites defined themselves by their race so as to be able to maintain themselves in a higher social position than minorities, Wright challenged this position and questioned the notion of race as being a mere white conception, a dominant discourse pronounced in favor of the white color as being tantamount to power and domination. In his lecture entitled "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," Wright observed: "Truly, you must now know that the word Negro in America means something not racial or biological but something purely social, something made in the United States" (Wright in Baker 2). Racial discourse is a tool of social domination which consists in relegating non-Whites to the position of subjects living on the margins of society. In this context, Wright represented the black subject in such a way as to rebuild him and place him in a social position, so to speak, to move him from the margin to the center. By bringing the black subject back to the center of social life, Wright challenged the supremacist position of Whites who designated Blacks as the Other (Demirtürk 270).

Wright's position on the racial issue can be put in perspective with that of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault for whom identity or race is only a pure social construction meant

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<sup>99</sup> « La couleur n'est pas ma patrie. Je suis un être humain avant d'être un Américain ; je suis un être humain avant d'être un Noir et si je traite des problèmes raciaux, c'est parce que ces problèmes ont été créés sans mon consentement, sans ma permission. Je suis opposé à toute définition raciale. Si j'écris sur les problèmes raciaux, c'est précisément pour mettre fin aux définitions raciales. Et je ne souhaite pas que qui que ce soit dans le monde où nous vivons se place à un point de vue racial, qu'il soit blanc, noir ou jaune. »

to allow those in a higher position to dominate those who are in a lower position. As Barthes wrote,

‘I’ 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 site to occupy. This ‘I’ which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes that are infinite, or, more precisely, lost” (Barthes 10).

Barthes views race as a matter of texts which are re-inscribed with its others. Yet, no text has a stable meaning or one meaning. It connects to other multiplicities to give a variety of meanings. If race is a matter of texts, therefore, it is a connection of intertextuality which assigns blackness a specific meaning according to the dominant’s worldview (Alzoubi, 2019). For Wright, race had always to be put between inverted comas because he considered race as a social construct, a social myth, not a biological fact (Alzoubi, 2019). From this point of view, Anthony Appiah emphatically asserts, “The truth is that there are no races” (Appiah 45). Wright followed this logic and wanted only to be defined as an individual playing a role in society and not as belonging to a racial category.

Whiteness and blackness are simply social constructs and Wright wanted to understand his own self as standing in the borderline of white and black culture. The subject is not stable but rather fragmented in a way that lacks homogeneity. That is why Wright mocked the white conception and definition of identity by making use of the fragmentary status of black identity to show that the Whites’ essentialist definition could not stand and that identity and culture were characterized by fragmentation, heterogeneity and difference (Maaloum, 2014). Wright wanted to leap out of fixed tradition and conformist mass cultural identity into modernity where everything kept on evolving in constant *différance*, to borrow from Derrida and his theory of fragmentation.

A good explanation of Derrida’s fragmentation resides in the fact that meaning is not a fixed reality. It is only through discourse (language) that people construct what is thought to be true. And because meaning depends on one’s own social construction, one cannot impose a fixed definition of identity on a given group of people, because such a definition varies from one place to another. The way Whites perceive Blacks cannot be the way Blacks perceive themselves and vice versa. The racial definition Whites give of Blacks and vice versa cannot but be in constant *différance* which makes racial definition simply impossible as a general rule. That is why Wright went beyond racial considerations and refused to behave like Blacks and Whites who rejected each other as different (Maaloum, 2014). To avoid having to take side, Wright decided not to choose but to take a middle position. This positioning between two



cultures (white and black) constituted an act of non-conformism to the division of society according to skin color.

The middle position put Wright in a situation of cultural hybridity, that is, he shaped his personality out of white and black cultural values, which signified a total rejection of the Manichean view of human relations. By embracing cultural hybridity, Wright certainly did not want to show that hybridity was an alternative to white or black culture (Maaloum, 2014). Rather, he simply intended to show that racial hegemony was not possible as hybridity constantly challenged both cultures on the color line to deny the hegemony of one over the other (Maaloum, 2014). In one *Native Son* scene, as already pointed out earlier, Bigger and Gus play white. For Maaloum, this play enables them to enter the white world through fantasy while keeping their black awareness. This is a kind of hybridity which rejects the domination of whiteness or blackness. Put differently, it is a form of de-territorialization of the stability racial identity entails. By playing white, Bigger and Gus enter the realm of hybridity which is a threat to Whites' representation, power and knowledge. One could also assume that Bigger's acting mocks whiteness and blackness as social constructs rather than being fixed or having an essence (Maaloum, 2014). Hybridity as it is used by Bigger and Richard respectively in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* enable them to manipulate white stereotypes and achieve clandestine subjectivity which Whites ignore. Once subjectivity is at hand, those who are deprived of everything and of their identity make use of strategies which ensue from their hybrid and fragmentary position and permit to contest white and/or black cultural domination. In this respect, it goes without saying that hybridity is a form of rebellion used by those who are culturally dispossessed to construct a genuine self (Maaloum 9, 10).

One can say that Wright, by combating racial considerations in human relations, implemented his transracial vision of society. His vision advocated a total disappearance of the notion of race and the emergence of a new model of society where people only talked about humanity and supported racelessness. Even if such a vision seemed to be utopic in the light of an extremely polarized world where various separatisms were ubiquitous during Wright's time, it still had the merit of existing. Its existence placed Wright in a position where he could see himself as a citizen of the world or, to borrow Cyrus Patell's (2004) concept, "a cosmopolitan citizen" capable of addressing all entities in conflict at the same time. On the other hand, this position left Wright uncomfortable. In wanting to play the game of racelessness in a world where the rule of the game seemed to be "either you are with us or against us," Wright was also the target of many accusations as Whites and Blacks (Baldwin for instance) suspected him of treason, especially after the publication of *Native Son*. Perhaps, the criticisms Wright faced,

following the publication of *Native Son*, influenced the writing of his next novel *Black Boy*. In this book, he castigates the flaws of Black American culture but still takes enough care to build a black protagonist who is conscientious and intelligent, two values which contrast sharply with those embodied by Bigger in *Native Son*. Nevertheless, one thing no criticism could change in Wright's wri(gh)ting, whether in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, was the peremptory expression of dispossession and non-conformism in his protagonists' fictional lives.

**PART TWO**

**THE EXPRESSION OF DISPOSSESSION AND  
NON-CONFORMISM IN WRIGHT'S MAJOR NOVELS:  
*UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN, NATIVE SON, AND  
BLACK BOY***

When the theme of dispossession is dealt with in Wright's works of art, it encapsulates a variety of aspects. In other words, dispossession is multi-faceted ranging from religious, moral, and psychosocial aspects, to political, judicial and economic ones. To understand this complexity, the first chapter of part two will look into the Wrightean expression of dispossession in the three novels. Dispossession has a significant impact on the lives of Wright's characters as they experience psychological instability and are compelled to assimilate and adjust to it to such an extent that they lose every social and cultural referent. Thus, it is important to analyze the various protagonists and other minor characters from a psychological point of view so as to highlight the impact of long-standing dispossession in their lives. In this respect, the artistic techniques used by Wright to address these issues will be dealt with as they make the literary text different from other texts by black or white writers. In other words, the Wrightean language conveys dispossession and all the consequences related to it. In this respect, the final chapter of this part will decipher Wright's use of language to show how he expressed dispossession and advocated for rebellion to move forward. More particularly, this part will approach writing as a non-conformist weapon before shedding light on the tension between moralism and humanism which often results in violence as a Wrightean alternative to recovering stability and a sense of self.

## CHAPTER IV: THE WRIGHTIAN FORMS OF DISPOSSESSION

One cannot grasp the whole meaning of the characters' dispossession without fathoming out its various forms of expression which permeate the three novels. The psycho-social features of dispossession reveal how they transform the characters' daily lives. Social and psychological dispossession affects them as a whole political and judicial arsenal has been put in place to ensure its persistence through the denial of political and judicial rights, leading to the characters' socio-economic rejection. This aspect is a transversal issue, here, as Wright makes use of symbols belonging to the real world to convey meaning in his fictional world and in these three fictions in particular. *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are replete with a variety of significant symbols. Therefore, this chapter would not be complete without deciphering the ways Wright addresses symbolism to develop the theme of dispossession.

### 1. Wri(gh)ting about the Psycho-Social Forms of Dispossession

When people are dispossessed of their rights to possession, they can be inclined to raising their voices to make either their families or communities become aware of the existence of the phenomenon in the hope that they will be joined by popular uproar. Yet in the case of Wright's characters, they are not even permitted to speak and when they do speak, nobody listens to them, which makes the voice of dispossessed characters inaudible. From Bakhtine's point of view, the problem lies in the fact that dispossessed subjects are loquacious among themselves but once in contact with the dispossessors' territory which fascinates them in terms of social welfare, they are not only denied any voice by the authoritative discourse of their dispossessors but are also made to adopt and internalize it. Bakhtine contends:

The authoritative discourse demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us quite independently of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative discourse is located in the distanced zone organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher [...]. It is a prior discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from other possible discourses that are equal. It is given [...] in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. It is a special language [...]. It demands our unconditional allegiance. It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it [...]. (Bakhtine 262-263)

Clearly enough, Bakhtine's contention reveals that the dispossessors' authoritative discourse functions as a transcendental force which works itself around, below, above and into dispossessed subjects in a way that they become totally possessed by it as is the case with Bigger in *Native Son* who has no voice in the court. He is a kind of witness of the debate between two ideological forces which try to define him without him speaking.

James A. Miller contends that in the court scene, "Bigger remains curiously detached from the action; he functions as a witness, an auditor to the public debate which rages about him, but not as a participant in the dialogue" (Miller 505) and, indeed, Bigger behaves in such a way because he is aware of the prevalence of the authoritative voice on him and any word from him can but only trigger more verbal outrages against him as Attorney Buckley has already done. In simpler terms, because Bigger lives in the margin of society, he has no access to the territorialized discourse booked for those who are part of mainstream society. That is why Max, who has access to this dominant discourse, is committed to speak for him. Nevertheless, when Max mouthpieces Bigger to defend his case in court, Buckley shouts with contempt: "Every decent white man in America ought to swoon with joy for the opportunity to crush with his heels the wooly head of this black lizard to keep him from scuttling on his belly farther over the earth and spitting forth his venom of death!" (*NS*, 313). Buckley's contemptuous shouts reveal his actual disappointment at Max daring to defend a marginalized individual who stands as a threat to the security of the center. In addition to Bigger in *Native Son*, Richard in *Black Boy* is subjected to his mother's intimidating him into silence every time he wants to challenge the dispossessors' authoritative discourse. "Can I go and peep at the white folks?" Richard asks his mother. "You keep quiet," his mother replies. "But that wouldn't be wrong, would it?" Richard tries to push further. "Quit talking foolishness!" (*BB*, 55), his mother violently retorts. Such a denial is meant by Wright to show the danger that language represents, because compelling those who are oppressed into the margin to keep quiet is tantamount to killing them silently just as Barroso-Fontanel suggests:

The major's refusal to let the minor speak is a symbolic killing since imprisoning him in this no-say is tantamount to denying his humanity [...]. The denial of the minority's speech hence appears as a means to ensure his subjection because, without words, they are effaced from the pages of history<sup>100</sup>. (Barroso-Fontanel 100)

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<sup>100</sup> « Le refus par le majeur de la prise de parole du mineur équivaut à une mise à mort symbolique puisque l'enfermer dans ce non-dire revient à nier son humanité. [...] Le refus de l'expression de la minorité apparaît dès lors comme un moyen d'assurer son assujettissement puisque, sans mots, elle est, de fait, effacé des pages de l'histoire. »

To some extent, although Ella is aware that a minor individual speaking before the major group can result in violence against him, she unconsciously participates in perpetuating dispossession by always keeping his son from speaking. Richard cannot understand such a taboo set around speaking to Whites. Nevertheless, though he cannot understand his mother's authoritative voice on the spot, he, for sure, will understand as an adult that his mother herself is overwhelmed by the authoritative discourse of the dominant society who presents questioning dispossession as a taboo subject that must be silenced as such. For Claudia C. Tate, "the motif of silence conceptualizes the difficulty that Richard has in establishing himself as a distinct and fully conscious individual. Keeping silence [...] indicated acceptance, submission to the conditions of life [...]" (Tate 118).

Voicelessness is epitomized by Bigger in *Native Son*. Wright portrays Bigger as a universal symbol for all those who are voiceless and whom nobody pays attention to, which is typical of marginalization. That is why the ransom note he writes to crook the Daltons does not raise any suspicion on him. It is one of the rarest times Bigger can directly address the audience but it remains blind and deaf to him and cannot hear him, simply because he speaks from the margin. Even after white policemen discover the truth about the ransom note and the faked kidnapping that he has written and planned to swindle the Daltons, they continue denying Bigger his voice, arguing that it was written by the communists:

The police were not satisfied with the account Erlone [the communist who was suspected of having written the ransom note] has given of himself and are of the conviction that he may be linked to the negro; they feel that the plan and the murder and kidnapping was too elaborate to be the work of the negro mind. (NS, 200)

At the moment the police doubt his intellectual capacity, Bigger "wanted to walk out into the street and up to the policemen and say, "No Jan didn't help me! He didn't have a damn thing to do with it [...]" (NS, 200), but unfortunately for him, he is already de-territorialized and too marginalized to be heard.

Territory, as Deleuze and Guattari perceive it, is always important for the individual as it sets the environment in which he expresses himself. Without any viable place, the individual cannot grow smoothly from childhood into adulthood. However, because territory becomes a scene of ruthless competition between the center and the margin, the strongest people sometimes poach into the place of the marginalized people and even dispossess them of the right to self-expression. Territorialization is so important in Wright's works that it is an object of dispossession in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. In "Big Boy Leaves Home," one cannot go to any place he likes and express his desires as we can see Big Boy and

his comrades, while going to the swimming pool, come across a fence marked “NO TRESPASSING.” Big Boy complains that “The white folks got plenty swimming pools n we ain got none” (*UTC*, 24). In other words, Whites have territorialized their own environment where they can cool their bodies by swimming while Big Boy and his comrades are refused such places and forbidden to venture into white territory:

Bobo pointed.  
‘See tha sign over yonder?’  
‘Yeah.’  
‘What it say?’  
‘NO TRESPASSING,’ read Lester.  
‘KNOW whut tha mean?’  
‘Mean ain no dogs n niggers erlowed,’ said Buck.  
‘Waal ain, wes here now,’ said Big Boy.  
Ef he ketched us even like this thered be trouble, so we just as waal go on in. (*UTC*, 24)

As one can see, the boys are well aware of the restriction of physical place and the after-effects of the violation of the white place which warns them against any trespassing. Mohamed Maaloum goes further to see beyond physical place psychological and moral barriers which stand between the boys and Jim Harvey:

The wood is used both literally to indicate Harvey’s property but also metaphorically signify the ideological racial difference, the world of the white man, the moral subject that black subjects must not enter unless they are invited [...]. This forbidden territory is guarded by the symbol ‘NO TRESPASSING,’ the significance of which the merry boys do not miss. (Maaloum 119)

Wright further shows that any breach of the place reserved to its possessor results in punishment and, in the worst of cases, more restrictions of the trespasser’s place as is the case of Bobo who is tied and burnt alive (*UTC*, 49) and Big Boy who is forced into a restricted place (a small hole) where “he shifted his body to ease the cold damp of the ground and thought back over the day” (*UTC*, 43), regretting his poaching into the white place. As Sondra Guttman contends, when one is confined to a place, he is placeless as is the case of Bigger in *Native Son* (Guttman 175). In fact, upon returning from the restaurant, Bigger is forced to sit between Mary and Jan; “there were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls” (*NS*, 66), which makes him feel cornered between the two walls. Wright further lets the reader perceive that “Bigger’s entire body tightened with suspense and dread. [...] His entire mind and body were painfully concentrated into a single point of attention” (*NS*, 106). It is true that Mary and Jan intend to break the barriers between them and Bigger but, as Guttman says, their “attempts at realizing social equality prompts Bigger to recognize his own placelessness [...]. Their clumsy attempt to create a No Man’s Land, a place of equality, only



serves to remind him of his circumscribed place allotted him” (Guttman 175-176). Marc Mvé Bekale pushes further into Bigger’s psyche and reveals that he becomes “a blocked individual. [...] This blockage is characteristic of a pathological state called catalepsy: the subject is immobilized, motionlessly frozen, he displays a lack of mental initiative and often mental paralysis” <sup>101</sup> (Mvé Bekale 175). Even though one may contend that Bigger’s sense of placelessness while sitting between Mary and Jan is ambivalent, Houston Baker explains that one has no place when one is forced into it. On the contrary, one is a placeless prisoner as Baker articulates:

Bigger’s South Side lacks the quality as it is traditionally defined. For a place to be recognized as actually a PLACE, as a personally valued locale, one may set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within boundaries set by the dominating authority then one is not a setter of place but a prisoner of another’s desire. Under the displacing impress of authority even what one calls and, perhaps, feels is one’s *own place* is, from the perspective of human agency, *placeless*. (Baker 104)

Placelessness becomes worse when the individual is not only faced with the restrictions of his social environment but also with his own family’s which results in confining him/her into tiny margins. Richard has a daily experience of this reality as he is faced with society and his family’s intention to alienate his physical and psychological movement from one place to another, his mother literally “telling [him] to keep still” (*BB*, 9), which marks him for life. And even though Richard struggles to move northward to get a place where he can enjoy his subjectivity, he will be disappointed to notice that place, as Baker conceives it, does not either exist in the North. In other words, Richard moves away from one place-dispossessed environment to another placelessness, just as the outspoken writer John Steinbeck observes on fleeing individuals:

I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over again in every part of the nation, a burning desire to go, to move, to get underway, any place, away from any Here. They spoke quietly how they wanted to go somewhere, to move about, free and unanchored, not towards something but away from something. Nearly every American hungers to move. (Steinbeck 10)

Wright’s hints at the same dispossession of place prevail in *Uncle Tom’s Children* where hungry people are faced with the sheriff and the mayor’s attempts to keep them from demonstrating in public place to claim for food. To dispossess the demonstrators of place, they try to use

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<sup>101</sup> « Bigger est ce qu’on appelle communément un individu bloqué. Mais ici ce blocage est caractéristique de l’état pathologique dit catalepsie : le sujet est immobilisé, figé du point de vue de la motricité, il présente un manque d’initiative mentale, parfois une paralysie de la pensée. »

Reverend Taylor, who is held in high esteem by his community, as a deterring tool by asking him “to use [his] influence and tell [his] people to stay *off* the streets tomorrow” (*UTC*, 151). It is a well-known fact that when there is plenty of food while people starve and their basic needs are not met, psycho-emotional disturbance occurs.

Each person has basic needs without which his/her personality development will be seriously influenced. For anyone to grow smoothly without any conflict with his/her social environment, some of his/her psychological needs, such as love, affection, friendship, independence, self-respect, self-esteem protection, pleasure gain, distress avoidance and attachment, should be met (Borg-Laufs, 2013). Yet a deep look into Wright’s characters reveals that these needs are taken away from them in various ways.

Richard in *Black Boy* and Bigger in *Native Son* really do not benefit from any self-esteem protection, pleasure gain, affection, and attachment neither in their families nor in society, as can be understood from Richard’s testimony: “I was resentful of being neglected. [...] All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient” (*BB*, 9-10). The same goes with Bigger’s mother who keeps on scolding him. “Boy, sometimes I wonder what makes you act like you do. [...] Sometimes you act the biggest fool I ever saw [...]. Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you” (*NS*, 18-19), Bigger’s mother neglectfully tells him off. It could be difficult to understand Bigger’s mother high pressure on him but Mvé Bekale conclusively finds in it Freudian explanation. In fact, from Bekale’s point of view, this pressure reflects a form of her own psychological dispossession (following her husband’s death) that she seeks to compensate through her son:

Mrs. Dalton is a widow. She experienced the biggest frustration of her life following her husband’s assassination. So, she perceives Bigger’s birth as compensation, the appearance of the hero through whom the happiness dream the father had been killed for would come true. Bigger represents everything for her: the husband’s substitute, the household center, the agent of social mobility. [...] Betraying the maternal ideal by his carelessness, Bigger becomes an object of repulsion<sup>102</sup>. (112)

Nevertheless, even though one could understand Mrs. Thomas’s pressure on her son from a psychoanalytical perspective, it is no less obvious that when children are scolded or ill-treated by their own parents, they can view their parents as “bad” (Borg-Laufs 42-23).

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<sup>102</sup> « Mrs Thomas est une femme seule. Elle connut la plus grande frustration lors de l’assassinat de son mari, aussi accueillit-elle la naissance de Bigger comme un dédommagement, l’apparition du héros qui accomplirait le rêve du bonheur pour lequel le père avait été tué. A ses yeux, Bigger représente tout : le nouveau centre, l’agent de la mobilité sociale. [...] Trahissant l’idéal maternel par son insouciance, Bigger devient objet de répulsion. »

If children need their parents or family members to appreciate what they do so that they can meet their need for self-esteem, the experience of Wright's characters is the opposite. The dispossession of self-esteem starts by Richard's mother who, instead of praising his consciousness-raising questions on life in general and the race issue in particular, always scolds him into silence, supposing that her son is too young to understand such questions. Richard and Bigger both live in their respective families' margins as nobody values nor pays much attention to their actions. As a result, to paraphrase Tate, their existence is punctuated with emotional suffering in its fundamental and essential nature and they are bound to struggle with emotional and psychological distress, which can sometimes lead them into dreadful acts (Tate 117).

To make sure their actions are paid attention to, Richard and Bigger end up posing dreadful acts. Richard burns the broom, the curtain, and finally sets the house on fire as evidenced in *Black Boy*:

I pulled out the broom and tore out a batch straws and tossed them into the fire and watch them smoke, turn black, blaze, [...] I rushed to the window and brought the flame in touch with the hems of the curtain. [...] Red circles were eating into the white cloth. [...] One half of the room now ablaze. (*BB*, 10-11)

Bigger commits two crimes, one against Mary and another one against Bessie. The burning of the family house, the place of intimacy, warmth, and the killing of Mary and Bessie are all expressions of the two characters' dispossession of tenderness. Burning and killing revert to dispossession, that is, the loss of something dear. The fire takes colors away, turns the white cloth into black while murder deprives the family unit by snatching away one of its dearest members. Gaston Bachelard wrote:

Fire and heat provide the means of explanation in the most various domains, because they are for us an opportunity of imperishable souvenirs, and of simple and decisive personal experiences. [...] Among all phenomena, it is the only one that can so clearly carry two values: good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is tenderness and torture. It is cuisine and Apocalypse. It is pleasure for the child wisely sitting close to the fireplace<sup>103</sup>. (Bachelard 23-24)

Bachelard's psychoanalysis of fire applies to Richard when he sets the house on fire. As Mvé Bekale suggests, it is good when "this fire [...] reveals his individuality and already shows the

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<sup>103</sup> « Le feu et la chaleur fournissent des moyens d'explication dans les domaines les plus variés parce qu'ils sont pour nous l'occasion des souvenirs impérissables, d'expériences personnelles simples et décisives [...] Parmi tous les phénomènes, il est vraiment le seul qui puisse recevoir aussi nettement les deux valorisations contraires : le bien et le mal. Il brille au Paradis. Il brûle à l'Enfer. Il est douceur et torture. Il est cuisine et Apocalypse. Il est plaisir pour l'enfant assis sagement près du foyer. »

boy's strong desire for knowledge, [his] ambitious spirit"<sup>104</sup> (Mvé Bekale 29). Meanwhile, it becomes evil when "fire slides into prohibitive meaning: its effects ignite adults' fury. Fire provokes commotion... [and] thus is associated with danger and death"<sup>105</sup> (29). Further events show that Richard's and Bigger's unconventional quests for self-esteem bring them into psycho-emotional trauma, the former being almost beaten into unconsciousness by his mother following his burning the house and the latter being sentenced to death: "You, Bigger Thomas," the judge articulates, "shall die on or before midnight Friday, March 13, in a manner prescribed by the laws of the State" (*NS*, 319). As for Richard, he has to "see huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows" (*BB*, 13), the likes of which no-one can understand except psychologically-oppressed people like Bigger to whom "it seems [...] that no sooner had he closed his eyes than he was wide awoken again, suddenly and violently, as though someone had grabbed his shoulders and had shaken him" (*NS*, 87).

It is already proved that "aggressive youths mostly have problems with a low self-esteem. Their aggressive behavior can be understood as an attempt to increase their self-esteem by dominating other people" (Borg-Laufs 43). Wright's characterization of Richard and Bigger corroborates this point of view as they can really be seen as two telling examples of aggressiveness. As they do not benefit from their environment's help to build their self-esteem, they fall into aggressiveness. All through the narratives, they can both be seen constantly fighting with their comrades and challenging family and school authorities. *Black Boy* and *Native Son* contain examples of Richard's acts of violence as he reports his fight with his schoolmate in the school yard: "I brushed the rock from his shoulder and ducked and grabbed him about the legs and dumped him to the ground. A volcano of screams erupted from the crowd. I jumped upon the fallen boy and started pounding him" (*BB*, 137). As for Bigger, he fights his street gang member Gus: "Gus passed him and started toward the rear tables. Bigger whirled and kicked him hard. Gus flopped on his face with a single movement of his body" (*NS*, 42).

One of Bigger's emotional instability takes place in one prison scene where a lot of people who all have emotional relationship with him pay him a visit in prison (*NS*, 232). From Johnson's point of view, this is meant by Wright to trigger emotional response from Bigger through stream of consciousness writing which permits to discover the character's mental and

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<sup>104</sup> « Ce feu [...] est révélateur de son individualité. Il laisse transparaître d'ores et déjà chez le garçonnet un fort désir de savoir, un esprit ambitieux. »

<sup>105</sup> La feu glisse vers une signification interdictrice : ses effets attisent la fureur des adultes. [...] Il est ainsi associé au danger, à la mort. »

emotional state<sup>106</sup> (Johnson 287). Indeed, Johnson's analysis turns out valid when put in perspective with Wright's narrative which sometimes displays stream of consciousness writing features as in *Native Son*:

Bigger cringed. Not this! Not here; not now! He did not want his mother to come here now, with these people standing round. He looked about, with a wild pleading expression [...]. Though he sat, Bigger felt his legs trembling. He was so tense in body and mind and when the door swung in he bounded up and stood in the middle of the room. He saw his mother's face; he wanted to run to her and push her back through the door. (NS, 232)

Bigger's emotional response to his family could seem strange as one could expect him to be satisfied with the solidarity of his family members who have come to sympathize with and encourage him. Nevertheless, a keen eye would find it normal because family is one of the hostile environments which, due to their psycho-emotional absence from his life, has pushed him into such a situation in which psycho-emotional dispossession sometimes meddles with psycho-moral one, which can be linked with Wright's own life. Indeed, though family members such as his mother worked hard to support him, the family constraints as the absence of his father, verbal outrages, beatings and hunger all contributed to make Wright rebellious as Bigger is to his family members.

Because of parental physical and psycho-emotional absence, Richard and Bigger find themselves psycho-morally dispossessed. They have to meet street life with all its risks of depravation, as evidenced by Richard who hides from a distance "to look up the secret and fantastic anatomies of black, brown, yellow, and ivory women [...] and laugh, point, whisper, joke, and identify [their] neighbors by the physiological oddities [...]" (BB, 15). As for Bigger, he practices masturbation along with his comrade Jack while watching a movie in theater:

He moved restlessly and his breath quickened; he looked round in the shadows to see if any attendant was near, the slouched far down in his seat. He glanced at Jack and saw that Jack was watching him out of the corners of his eyes. They both laughed.

'You at it again?' Jack asked.

'I'm polishing my night stick,' Bigger said [...].

'I bet you ain't even hard yet,' Jack whispered.

'I'm getting hard.'

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<sup>106</sup> "The term stream of consciousness was coined by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) to describe the narrative methods whereby certain novelists describe the unspoken thoughts and feelings of their characters without resorting to objective or conventional dialogue. It gives the impression of the reader's peeping into the flow of various experiences in the character's mind, gaining intimate access to his/ her private thoughts" (Saha 22). For more details on stream of consciousness writing, see also Noor, Rohimmi, Rosli Talif and Zanyar Kareem Abdul's "Exploring Stream of Consciousness as a Narrative Technique in Modern Novels" (2013).

'Mine's like a rod,' Jack said with intense pride. (*NS*, 36)

This attitude is the result of psychological dispossession. According to Freud, the human psyche is divided into three parts: the *id*, the *ego*, and the *super ego* which interact with each other. The *id* is located in the unconscious and operates regardless of external moral principles and is responsible for sending pleasure requests to the *ego*. The *ego*, which works on reality principles, is in charge of regulating the *id*'s needs so that these needs can be satisfied by reality. The *super-ego* gives the *ego* important information on acceptable behavior in terms of social norms. In this psychological framework, the *ego* acts as a mediator between the *id* and the *super ego*. If the *ego* sends the *id*'s request to the *super ego* and the latter denies it, the *ego* sends back refusal discharges to the *id*. If the *id* intends to disregard the *superego*'s norms, the *ego* punishes it with the feeling of anxiety (Freud, 1933). In some cases, it happens that the *ego* and the *super-ego* are faced with the *id*'s repression following its impression of being dispossessed by the *ego* and the *super ego*. Such a repression leads the individual to display unconventional behaviors like Richard in *Black Boy* who hides to secretly admire black women's physical appearances, and Bigger who masturbates and finally kills Mary Dalton for sexual reasons. These acts stem either from an unsolved libidinal need during the phallic stage because of their mother and father's absence from home or simply from their *id*'s rebellion against pleasure and emotional dispossession. In reality, parents and society are the super-structure or *super ego* of the individual. If the individual lacks such a moral reference and authority to regulate moral behavior, he ends up taking his own path, and this path may lead to unconventional behavior as is the case with Richard and Bigger who are both looking for their own dispossessed identity.

One of the features of identity dispossession is based on lying and misrepresentation. In fact, in order to keep their control over the people they dispossess, dispossessors compel them to lie about their identity so as to corroborate the one that has been assigned to them. To achieve that goal, they make use of their tools of propaganda such as the media which are in charge of fanning false news or misrepresentations about people who have nothing. Wright pictures this reality in *Native Son* where the media contribute to tarnish Bigger's image through information which do not necessarily correspond to his identity. Bennett Capers underscores the role media played in the construction of the image of the Scottsboro Boys in the Scottsboro boys' case:

[...] The local media racialized and sexualized the defendants. The *Chattanooga News* described them as savages. The Huntville's *Daily Time* proclaim that the crime 'savored

of the jungle' and exemplified the 'meanest African corruption.' One of the youths was even dubbed the 'ape nigger'<sup>107</sup>. (Capers 121)

As can be noticed, Blacks are portrayed as savages by the media, which does not improve their image in society and does not reveal who they really are. This idea is taken up by Wright when he portrays Bigger. The misrepresentation of Bigger is meant to convince the public opinion of his inhumanity, just as was the case in the 1930s with the Scottsboro boys whom the narrative glimpses at when Jan asks Bigger: "You've read about the Scottsboro boys?" "I heard about 'em," Bigger mumbles. "Don't you think we did a good job in helping to keep 'em from killing these boys?", Jan asks him again. "It was alright," Bigger shortly replies (*NS*, 72). Regarding the role of the press among people, Samuel Webber draws media users' attention by showing them that "people think they are looking at something on TV but in reality they are looking at a way of looking" (Webber in Elmer 770). If people are looking at a way of looking, they can be unconsciously or consciously misled and fall under the influence or be the accomplices of the dispossessors. In Bigger's case, just after he is arrested and not yet brought to a judge, without taking into account the judicial principle according to which every citizen is presumably innocent, the media already condemn him and even transform his murder into rape and assassination. For instance, no sooner has Bigger been arrested than the *Tribune* reports:

NEGRO RAPIST FAINTS AT INQUEST [...]. Overwhelmed by the sight of his accusers, Bigger Thomas, Negro sex-slayer fainted dramatically this morning at the inquest of Mary Dalton, millionaire Chicago heiress [...]. The black killer sat cowed and fearful as hundreds sought to get a glimpse of him [...]. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast. (*NS*, 222)

It is clear through its report that the *Tribune* tarnishes Bigger's identity by describing him as a rough beast with a view to further aggravating people's negative view of him. In this respect, Eric Agbessi cannot be gainsaid when he rightly observes that "The [American] media have structurally evolved towards a line of strict racial division"<sup>108</sup> (Agbessi 360). Actually, the press participates in Blacks' misrepresentations as is the case with Richard and Harrison in *Black Boy*.

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<sup>107</sup> The local media representation of the Scottsboro boys took place in a national context wherein Black Americans in general were stereotypically portrayed by media in a way that influenced public perception of Blacks. Wright's use of Bigger's misrepresentation by local media is meant to glimpse at and denounce media racialized portrayal of Blacks during the Jim Crow era. For more information on the negative role played by national media in Black American portrayal, see Narissa M. Punyanunt Carter's "Perceived Realism of African American Portrayal on Television" (2008), and T.E. Ford's "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals of African Americans on Person Perception" (1997).

<sup>108</sup> « Les médias, structurellement, ont longtemps évolué vers une ligne de stricte division raciale. »

To strengthen and justify their acts of dispossession, dispossessors do their best to manipulate characters. They proceed in a way that those they dispossess fully participate to their fate. In one *Black Boy* scene, Richard and Harrison are manipulated to fight like bulls for Whites' pleasure as was the case during slavery with white masters, which allows Wright to perpetuate dispossession through history. Even though they discover this trap, they finally play the bull fight, strengthening their likening to animals. Being deprived of one's identity can further be seen in Grandpa who does not benefit from his war pension due to a problem of identification:

When he applied to the War Department for pension, no trace could be found of his ever having served in the Union Army under the name of Richard Wilson. It was rumored that the white officer had been Swede and that had a poor knowledge of English. Another rumor had it that the white officer had been a Southerner and had deliberately falsified Grandpa's papers. (*BB*, 153)

The use of rumors by Wright is a strategy to accuse the government without being blamed for libeling since it is just rumors. Nevertheless, these rumors show how a committed war veteran's identity can be wiped out from record due to mispronunciation and go from visibility to invisibility due to Whites' linguistic power. As Lâle Demirtürk points out,

Wright's grand-father's story is a significant example of how a Black American can be "erased" from the official transcript simply because he mispronounced his name as Richard Winson instead of Richard Wilson, making it impossible for him to get his pension from the War Department after serving in the Union Army, a fact that explain why the Southern officer had deliberately falsified Grandpa's papers. (Demirtürk 270)

The Southern officer reportedly falsifies Grandpa's identity because he comes from the South. He is visibly prey to black stereotypes which lead him to think Grandpa does not deserve much attention or recognition from a country dominated by white people. Mann experiences the same in *Uncle Tom's Children* as the white man ignores his name:

'The two soldiers loomed over him.  
'What's your name?'  
'Mann, Suh [...].'  
'O.K Stand up nigger!'  
'What you say your name was?'  
'Mann, suh [...].'  
'Where you from?'  
'The South En, suh [...].'  
'You aint lying, are you, nigger?' (*UTC*, 99)

As can be noticed from this conversation, the white soldier refuses to call Mann by his name though he tells him it twice. He prefers calling him "nigger" instead of his name, which is a



common practice to dispossess Blacks of their names and, therefore, of their identity. Whether in private or in media spheres, Blacks who have nothing are altogether branded a “nigger identity”. Wright uses this device to show how identity can be easily suppressed and taken away from black individuals and then replaced at will by Whites.

Black identity is shaped by the fantasies of popular culture through the media, movies and cabarets where Blacks are indoctrinated by white hegemonic ideology (Maaloun 97). In such circumstances, the existence of black identity is dependent on what the dispossessors decide for Blacks according to time or place. In *Black Boy*, the narrative shows how these self-appointed identifiers can lead Blacks to a fragmented identity:

I had been what my surroundings had demanded, what my family, conforming to the dictates of the whites above them, had exacted of me, and what the whites had said I must be. Never fully being able to be myself, I had slowly learned that the South could recognize but a part of man, could accept but a part of his personality, and all the rest, the best and deepest things of heart and mind, were tossed away in blind ignorance. (*BB*, 297)

After such a blatant recognition of being “identity-less” in the South, where many “wear the mask contributing to strengthen white stereotypes” (Maaloun 236), Richard plans to escape northward to regain some sense of identity, just as Wright himself flew from the South to the North, then to France to enjoy his full identity out of the imposed white mask. However, even though Richard flees to the North, he considers the consequences of southern dispossession indelible on his adult identity (Wilhite 117). Even this adult identity is elusive and vague as a whole ideology was set up to gather all Blacks under the same identity by naming them either “boy” or “nigger” as Wright reveals in the three novels.

Calling all Blacks “boy” is a practice which symbolizes the denial of identity to Blacks. Maaloum calls it the “boy stereotype” to describe the power relation between Blacks and Whites<sup>109</sup>. As a boy, the black man depends on the white man to grow into adulthood or manhood, which gives the white man a dominant position (Maaloum 83). Actually, Wright sets out to demonstrate that black identity is defined according to each one’s behavior. When he or she behaves according to white racist norms, he/she is seen as docile and childlike. When he/she

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<sup>109</sup> In his analysis of *Lawd Today*, Mohamed Maaloum contends that Wright deploys the “boy stereotype” to show and examine the extent to which dispossessed people like Jake are penetrated by the discourses of white culture. The “boy stereotype” shows Jake’s infantilization and emasculation by the dominant patriarchal culture of the white man. This stereotype establishes power relation between Blacks and Whites in a way that the former’s subjectivity and manhood is denied (Maaloum 83). The same goes with Wright’s other characters in the corpus where black characters are treated like boys or children just as the title *Black Boy* and *Uncle Tom’s Children* suggest.

challenges these norms, he/she is seen as a beast, a savage acting out savage behaviors. This is seen in *Uncle Tom's Children* with Reverend Taylor. As long as he helps Whites control his black community, he is seen as “a responsible man in this community” (*UTC*, 148), but once he attempts to achieve self-awareness, he is treated like a boy or a “nigger” just as Sheriff Britten addresses him: “Listen, boy! [...] I want you to get this straight. [...] The quicker all you niggers get sense enough in your Goddamn thick skulls to keep away from them Reds the better off you'll be!” (*UTC*, 149).

When the definition of one's identity depends on what others think and do, it is the whole self which is negated or effaced, dispossessed and in such a case one can simply talk about cultural dispossession as Maaloun remarkably sums up:

Black identity is determined by the loss of the traditional referents that are supposed to provide black men with the necessary social anchors to develop as whole and unitary individuals. These referents, which consist of white culture and black males' own popular culture, relegate black masculinity to the margins of social and political experience and lock it away from agency and manhood. Stripped of the social and cultural frame of reference that enables them to entertain a healthy relationship with their environment and pushed to the fringes of both public and private life, black men in Wright's fiction thus experience an identity crisis that goes beyond mere alienation to self-negation and effacement. (Maaloun 1)

Wright chose to write and describe the black identity crisis to denounce the fact that Blacks were culturally caught between a rock and a hard place. Not only can't they be integrated into white culture but they are also prevented from developing a black identity which enables them to become whole individuals rather than culturally fragmented individuals. By writing and describing the black identity crisis, Wright could be projecting his own situation as he was rejected by Blacks and Whites respectively because of his intellectualism and non-conformism and his skin color, making genuine identity impossible. It is the impossibility of the black identity which leads his dispossessed characters into self-denial or, to borrow Maaloun's words, “self-negation and effacement.”

To relegate black culture to the margins of social experience and ensure its denial, assimilation policies are used to enforce cultural dispossession and in this case, violence is not discarded against individuals or communities who attempt to question the cultural hierarchy. Such violence contributes to destroy the original culture of communities. Their incapacity to teach or transmit their own culture to their offspring symbolizes this form of dispossession. As a result, black people cannot understand each other because they have no culture and their only resource is to adjust to white culture or the dominating culture.

One of the basic features of cultural dispossession resides in preventing the culturally dispossessed from developing as a whole and finding their place in the mainstream culture. Skin color is used as a discursively constructed strategy to purposefully lead the culture of the minor group in a situation of crisis. This occurs because their cultural values do not fit into the mainstream mode of identification which considers minor culture as marginal. Wright expresses this idea as his characters find themselves in a borderline cultural position, which he clarifies:

All groups define their identities through some form of binary opposition to other groups [and] the very process of suturing the (relative) 'homogeneity' that is crucial to the definition of that group's 'identity' [...] also simultaneously constitutes the process of rupturing various subjects on its borders: the border subject becomes the site on and through which a group defines its identity. That is, the body and consciousness of the subject caught between two groups are cleaved by those groups, and hence the ruptured body of that subject becomes the text on which the structure of the identity of the groups is written in inverted form. (Wright, 2001, 52)

Wright likened black culture to white oppression. Whites used the police to dispossess Blacks and Blacks used the family to dispossess other Blacks, then perpetuating their alienation as wished and sustained by Whites. Baldwin criticized Wright and contended that for the latter, "in Negro life there exist[ed] no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father's house" (Baldwin 28). Baldwin may have lost sight of the fact that Wright was a pragmatic writer and had decided to show exactly the opposite, that is to say: blacks shared cultural and educational common values and were able to express and write it.

Education is meant to make the individual benefit from society. However, some minority groups are sometimes denied the advantages of good education. (Vogel 195). In addition to Whites who usually educated Blacks through violence to keep them in their place (197), the desertion of Wright's father from the house dispossessed him of proper education, a fact which is felt in his writing. Unfortunately for Wright, Whites were not interested in his educational problems and Blacks did not either help him build himself as an individual (196), as we can read and understand with the three novels. Wright, much like his protagonist Bigger, suffered from educational dispossession. It was not until 1915 that he was finally fortunate enough to be enrolled in the Howe Institute at the age of seven. However, his schooling was not regular. Wright projects this episode of his life through his autobiography, saying that though he "was nearly nine years of age, [he] had not had a single, unbroken year of school" (*BB*, 64) and "until [he] entered Jim Hill public school, [he] had but one year of unbroken study; with the exception of one year at church school, each time [he] had begun a school term

something happened to disrupt [him]" (*BB*, 135). As for Bigger, his schooling only stops at the ninth grade. All the disruptions have a negative impact on Wright's performance at school as they "overwhelm him every time he has to write on the blackboard, read aloud, or just say his name" (Fabre, 1986, 20).

In *Black Boy*, Richard is also dispossessed of his reading passion for lack of books. When he enters primary school, his grandmother "[has] always burned the books [he has] brought into the house, branding them as worldly" (*BB*, 142). In his adulthood, he is prevented from reading intellectual productions by his own grandmother and by Whites, forcing him to lie in order to get access to documents in the library. Such a situation shows that despite the coming into force of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendment abolishing human bondage and giving full citizenship to every American, education, be it personal or academic, was still an issue for minor groups and Blacks in particular. Moreover, anyone who attempted to challenge this reality was violently dealt with by the political and judicial Establishment.

## 2. The Politico-Judicial Outlooks of Dispossession

In Wright's fictional world, dispossession takes on politico-legal forms which legalize and legitimize the deprivation of the poor in almost all areas of daily life such as education, health, individual and collective freedoms, transportation and justice. All these forms of deprivation can be lumped into a great systemic whole which is Jim Crowism, a political-judicial system that enshrines dispossession in all aspects of the daily life of colored people. Jim Crow laws were so well designed that politicians used it for electoral purposes<sup>110</sup>. This use of law as a political weapon is loudly denounced in *Native Son* by Wright who uses the character of Max as his mouthpiece. Max, the lawyer, is in charge of defending Bigger. Max accuses Buckley, the State attorney, of wanting to use Bigger's case for political gain. "You're afraid that you won't be able to kill that boy before the April elections, if we handle his case, aren't you, Buckley?" (*NS*, 229) Max asks Buckley before explaining why he defends Bigger:

I'm defending this boy because I am convinced that men like you made him what he is. His trying to blame the Communists for his crime was a natural reaction for him. He had heard men like you lie about the Communists so much that he believed them. If I

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<sup>110</sup> Jim Crow laws were a set of laws enforced after black emancipation to discriminate Blacks and colored people from public life. For instance, the Mississippi General Assembly passed laws preventing Blacks from voting (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017). White politicians used them to exclude Black Americans from political affairs and Communists used it in their defense of Black American rights to promote their ideology. See Urofsky Melvin's "Jim Crow Laws" in Encyclopedia Britannica (2017).

can make the people of this country understand why this boy acted like he did, I will be doing more than defending him. (*NS*, 230)

It is clear that Buckley, who represents the State, is the political figure that Max singles out to castigate as being responsible for Bigger's misbehavior through the passing of Jim Crow laws which instill fear in him in a way that he ends up killing Mary Dalton out of fear. To put more pressure on the court and show the legitimacy of his demanding death sentence for Bigger, Attorney Buckley makes reference to the mob shouting similar demands outside, which Max once again denounces. "I notice that," Max deploras, "the State's Attorney did not dwell upon why Bigger Thomas killed those two women. There is a mob waiting, he says, so let us kill. His only plea is that if we don't kill, then the mob will kill" (*NS*, 294).

In Wright's fictional world, the political system as conceived by those in power is designed to perpetuate the domination of the dominant group over the so-called inferior or dispossessed groups which can never dream of becoming political leaders. Even though some members of dispossessed groups can become political leaders, their leadership remains imprisoned within their small community, a reality which is implicit in the Mayor's discussion with Reverend Dan Taylor about his son Jimmy:

'Hows Jimmy?'  
'Jus fine, suh.'  
'That's a fine boy right you've got, Dan.'  
'Ahm sho glad yuh think so, suh.'  
'If you raise that boy right he will be a leader of his people some day, Dan.' (*UTC*, 147)

As the mayor ironically puts it, Jimmy will be a leader of his people. One may fail to unravel all the cynical implications engulfed in the mayor's compliments and even Taylor does not seem to understand their dispossessing meaning as he replies, "That's the one hope of mah life, suh [...] with deep emotion" (*UTC*, 147). Yet the mayor's words are full of innuendos. In clearer terms, the political arena is territorialized according racial membership, which means Jimmy is forbidden to become a leader of the whole society which is made up of Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, Indians etc. In a larger sense, the only thing a black man can dream of is to lead his own people as the overall society, including the black community, is dominated by Whites who make use of every means at their disposal to perpetuate their domination.

However, domination cannot be perpetuated indefinitely without the conditions of this domination ending up giving rise to attempts at revolt from the dominated people. That is why drastic strategies are set up to ensure the sustainability of this domination, one of the most striking of which is the culture of fear. This culture consists in building in the psychology of

the dominated group a feeling of fear about any inclination to challenge the established political order because of the devastating consequences such a challenge could result in. In this respect, Buckley's campaign poster in *Native Son* is a symbol of black fear as the narrative shows:

He looked at the poster, the white face was fleshy but stem, one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passer-by. The poster showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it, it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. Above the top of the poster were the tall red letters: YOU CAN'T WIN! (NS, 23)

The inscription "YOU CAN'T WIN" is done in red capital letters which symbolize blood and death. The inscription makes Bigger understand he can't win his battle for identity and any trial to win would result in blood and death. In the same vein, Capers insists "all along the novel the law has used symbols of fear to confine Bigger's movements; *Fear*, the title of the first section of the novel, has always been at hand" (Capers 136). Capers is all the righter since the red inscription represents a red line drawn for the dispossessed subjects not to cross.

The political system has drawn a red line between the dominant group and the dominated one, a line so blood-red that the dominated group must neither physically nor psychologically cross as Bigger testifies: "I wanted to be an aviator once. But they wouldn't let me go to the school where I was suppose' to learn it. They built a big school and then drew a line around it and said nobody could go to it but those who lived within the line that kept all the colored boys out" (NS, 277). Bigger's words clearly indicate the physical territorialization of schools, which evokes the ironical "separate but equal" principles of Jim Crow laws which blessed the partition of American society. Irony basically lies in the fact white schools are put in the center of the educational system, while colored schools are relegated to its depths. In a related vein, Barroso-Fontanel asserts, "The partition of American society according to the lines initially drawn by the white majority contributes to the minoring experience African-Americans have gone through from the beginning of their history"<sup>111</sup> (Barroso-Fontanel 37). Red territorialization is also physically symbolized by the "NO TRESPASSING" sign in "Big Boy Leaves Home." In this short story, as Big Boy and his comrades set out to venture into a white swimming pool, they are faced with the inscription "NO TRESPASSING [which] mean ain no dogs n niggers erllowed" (UTC, 24). Even though Big Boy and his comrades break into this white territory certainly because of their childish naivety, it is this fear of the red line that makes Bigger fearful

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<sup>111</sup> « Le cloisonnement de la société américaine selon les lignes définies initialement par la majorité blanche contribue à l'expérience de minoration vécue par les afro-américains depuis le début de leur histoire. »

of approaching the dominant group even if a few individuals of this group such as Jan try to reassure him this red line does not exist between them and Bigger. Nevertheless, Bigger remains in the margin and does not fall into the naivety of the likes of Jan, Mary, Big Boy and his comrades because he is fully aware the whole political system is designed in such a way as to keep the dominated group in constant fear of the dominant one. As Onunkwo *et al.* point out, “there is a dividing social line between whites and blacks already rooted deep in the society’s political system which has constructed structural fears in the consciousness of blacks among whom Bigger is a spotted victim [...]” (Onunkwo et al. 111).

Racial fear is made possible by the breakthrough of white nationalists who advocate racial separatism in a Manichean view of race relations. In *Native Son*, Max denounces this white nationalist ideology which has become a master in the art of political dispossession, depriving marginalized people of their rights and making mutual understanding between races impossible. These most feared white nationalists are the Ku Klux Klan which occupies a prominent place in Wright’s criticism. White supremacists are terrorizing the minds of marginalized groups to prevent them from enjoying the benefits of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments as Wright reveals in *Black Boy* through an interview between Richard and an unnamed man<sup>112</sup>:

‘Did you hear of the Ku Klux Klan?’ he [the man] asked me [Richard] softly.  
‘Sure. Why?’  
‘Do you know what the Ku Kluxers do to colored people?’  
‘They kill us. They keep us from voting and getting good jobs,’ I said.  
‘Well, the paper you’re selling preaches the Ku Klux Klan doctrines,’ he said. (*BB*, 145)

This discussion occurs when Richard unconsciously sells papers promoting white supremacist propaganda. For sure, as a boy, he still does not understand the political implications of selling Ku Klux Klan papers, which is the opposite with Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* who, as a grown-up, is already aware of the dreadfulness of this movement whose landmark symbol, the burning

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<sup>112</sup> The Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution was ratified in 1868 and guaranteed citizenships to former slaves and any other persons born or naturalized in the United States. The Amendment obliged States to stop violating Blacks’ lives without due process of law. For instance, the third clause reads, “nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law.” This section was meant to keep States from discriminating Blacks and assaulting their lives. The Fifteenth Amendment gave the federal government power to sanction any state which deprived their citizens the right to vote. Section 1 reads, “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. For more details on the importance of the Fourteenth Amendment, see Michael W. McConnell’s “Fourteenth Amendment: A Second Revolution or the Logical Culmination of Tradition?” (1991). For the Fifteenth Amendment, see William C. Coleman’s “Fifteenth Amendment” (1910).

cross, troubles his psychological stability even from a distance to the point of making him distrust his own crucifix around his neck:

[...] That cross was not the cross of Christ, but the cross of the Ku Klux Klan. He had a cross of salvation around his throat and they were burning one to tell him that they hated him! No! He did not want that. Had the preacher trapped him? He felt betrayed. He wanted to tear the cross from his throat and throw it away. They lifted him into a waiting car and he sat between two policemen, still looking at the fiery cross. The sirens screamed and the cars rolled slowly through the crowded streets and he was feeling the cross that touched his chest, like a knife pointed at his heart [...]. Then [...] with bated breath he tore his shirt open, not caring who saw him. He gripped the cross and snatched it from his throat. He threw it away, cursing a curse that was almost a scream. (NS, 266)

In this scene, Wright shows the powerful effect of the Ku Klux Klan's cross on Bigger. The latter is given a cross of salvation by Reverend Hammond whom he can trust and hope for mutual understanding and forgiveness. Yet all hopes are overshadowed by the Ku Klux Klan's burning cross which psychologically tortures Bigger into snatching his own cross and throwing it away, a gesture which symbolizes Bigger's throwing away every single hope for salvation or forgiveness. Desperation turns into real facts later because, despite his brilliant plea imploring mutual understanding and the court's forgiveness for Bigger, Max cannot prevent Bigger from escaping death sentence. This condemnation suggests that forgiveness and mutual understanding remain a moral ideal which is not attainable for those who are deprived of any judicial help. On the contrary, they are denied any humanity by tumultuous social relations which force them into blind obedience of the oppressive political principles that the dominant group has enforced. That is the political ideology which prevails in society and perpetuates the status quo of dispossession, which Wilhite highlights as ideological oppression. "The South ideology interpellates black boy," Wilhite contends, and "calls for him to subjugate freely his conscious awareness of the oppressive social relations and then enter a middle ground that will reproduce the relations of oppression" (107). Wilhite's comment is validated by Richard in *Black Boy*: "I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation's capital has striven to keep out of Negro life; I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo" (BB, 169). These wrongs and taboos are among others political awareness that the dominant class strives to snatch from minor groups because keeping them away from political awareness is part of the strategy used to keep them politically and socially dependent and submissive to the dominant group.

Bigger's death sentence is part of the strategy "to produce a socially dependent black people, who are politically dispossessed, helpless and entirely subdued to white hegemony" (Maaloum 160). Such hegemony is maintained either by brandishing the fear of death before



Blacks or closely supervising their lives. In this respect, Maaloum goes further to contend that “[t]he surveillance [...] serves to reinforce blacks’ social death [...] in the use of lynching to maintain the socio-political limitations placed on blacks’ life [...]” (160). Because dispossessed people are socio-politically under control and limited in a yet democratic country which is supposed to guarantee equal opportunity to every citizen, they sometimes find psychological alternatives in undemocratic systems which they do not consider different from democracy in terms of power assertiveness. That is the case with Bigger in *Native Son*. He initially imitates the democratically elected president, which testifies his thirst for the political power, economic and social possession he has been deprived of. In Mathews’ words, “When Bigger and Gus play white [president], they do indeed voice their desire for power and authority” (Mathews 285). Since they are put aside the democratic ideals, however, Bigger personally falls into emotional preference for fascists and dictators simply because they make a difference and he hopes Blacks would act one day powerfully as dictators do:

Of late he [Bigger] had liked to hear of men who could rule others, for in actions such as these he felt that there was a way to escape from this tight morass of fear and shame. [...] He liked to hear how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. [...] He was not concerned with right or wrong. [...] He felt that someday there would be a black man who would whip the black people into a tight band and together they would act. [...] He never thought of this in precise mental images, he felt it. (*NS*, 109-110)

Bigger’s emotional sympathy with dictatorship is also experienced by other characters who, even though they do not embrace dictatorial ideologies, get involved in radical ideas such as communism which is repressed by the dominant existing political establishment.

Being dispossessed of any political rights leads many into communism as they hope to combine collective efforts to overthrow the prevalent existing democracy, enjoyed by the powerful, and to establish a more egalitarian social and political system. However, this objective does not take into account the political hunt unleashed against communists. Indeed, many Blacks, communists and trade unions are severely ill-treated and terrorized in relation to Bigger’s crime. This is contrary to democratic claims as Max, the communist lawyer, strives to demonstrate:

The authorities of the city and state deliberately inflamed the public mind to the point they could not keep the peace without martial law. And, because I dared defend this Negro boy, for days my mail was flooded with threats against my life. [...] The hunt for Bigger Thomas served as an excuse to terrorize the entire Negro population, to arrest hundreds of communists, to raid labor union headquarters and workers’ organizations. (*NS*, 299)

Consistent with Max's demonstration is the fact that even the press, which is supposed to be neutral, contributes to the public hostility against the communists as journalists try to pressure Bigger into lying upon Jan Erlone so as to fan false information on communists (*NS*, 301). The State attorney, David Buckley, also keeps on accusing communists of being involved in Bigger's crimes (*NS*, 269). Buckley even blames Jan Erlone for eating, shaking hands with "Negroes" and making them believe they have the same rights as Whites (*NS*, 251-253). Political persecution against communists is no less clear in *Uncle Tom's Children* where political authorities hunt them down because they intend to march and claim for their rights, just as Wright was persecuted as a communist and was obliged to leave his home country to escape from the violence of McCarthyism. Sue and her son Johnny-Boy are patent examples of that political persecution. While Johnny Boy and his fellow communists are planning their march, he and his mother have to be faced with the sheriff's death threats as the narrative shows:

'There is gonna be a meetin,' said the sheriff. 'Tha nigger son of yos is erround here somewheres n Ah aim to find him. Ef yuh tell us where he is n ef he talks, mabbe hell git off easy. But ef we hafta find im, well kill im! Ef hafta find im, then yuh git a sheet t put over im in the mawnin, see? Git yuh a sheet, cause hes gonna be dead!' (*UTC*, 196)

Indeed, as can be deduced from this excerpt, political freedom is not the best shared right in the type of society Wright depicts in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Every attempt to engage in alternative political solutions to the plight of those who are submitted to dispossession is harshly dealt with. Sue and her son Johnny-Boy learn it the hard way as they are finally lynched in their political actions, a lynching that Wright takes enough care to describe in a way that catches the reader's sensibility:

Lemme shoot her, Sheriff! The sound of the shot and the streak of fire that tore its way through her chest forced her to live again intensely. She had not moved, save for the slight jarring impact of the bullet. She felt the heat of her own blood warming her cold, wet back [...]. She felt rain falling into her wide-open, dimming eyes and heard faint voices. Her lips moved soundlessly [...]. (*UTC*, 214-215)

In this "Bright Morning Star" scene, Sue and Johnny-Boy are both lynched in the wood as a result of their political membership, and their death at the hands of the State represented by the sheriff symbolizes the death of communism. Nevertheless, dispossessed people like Bigger remain so confident in communism insofar as they do not succumb to their community Reverend's invitation to divert from this ideology and embrace that of God. When Reverend Hammond visits Bigger in his cell, he advises him to reject the communists who want to help

him concretely and to rely on God, which Bigger protests against altogether (Mathews 284-285).

The oppressors are aware that any political awareness among those who are submitted to dispossession would lead to self-awakening and protest. That is the reason why it is seen all through Wright's corpus that communists are persecuted and banned from exercising their political choices. However, what was ironical about communists was that they finally failed to understand the root causes of Blacks' dispossession and even fell into political censorship against Wright. The latter initially had great respect and belief in the Communist Party as a unique collective tool to be used to fight against individual and collective dispossession. As communists incarnated Wright's future hopes for a more egalitarian society, he welcomed them with cheers and even engaged in communist political organs as he was an elected executive secretary of the *Left Front* (Carreiro 249). That is why the powerful and revolutionary potential of communism is glorified in *Uncle Tom's Children* where, for instance, communists succeed in marching and triumphing over food dispossession in "Fire and Cloud."

However, because communists themselves intended to practice intellectual alienation and used the black plight for their selfish communist propaganda, Wright expressed his fears and mistrust toward communism. Such fears and mistrust are felt in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Wright eventually suspected Marxism could not provide full solution to the racial problem as it was not specifically designed to deal with the black problem (244). Communists failed to recognize the particularity of Blacks in their broader fight for equality. Tolentino contends that "this was done on purpose to avoid racial division within the party and challenge Garveyism on Black Nationalism (Tolentino 379). For Wright, if democratic assimilation could be extended to Blacks, the issue of racism would address itself naturally (389). But because this is not the case, only a combination of class and race consciousness could truly integrate Blacks into American social and political system (389). Communism made Wright even more alienated than the South as it rejected his individuality. For Janice Thaddeus, communists truncate people's capacity to think individually (205). They really appeared blind to the racial problem and just wanted to use it to defend their political ideals, which is corroborated by Max's own words in *Native Son*: "If you had not dragged the name of the Communist Party into this murder, I'd not be here" (NS, 230). In other words, Max defends Bigger, not necessarily because he longs for universal justice but simply because he wants to use Bigger's case to restore the reputation of the Communist Party which, to some extent, has become disillusionment for Wright.

Wright's hope in the Communist Party shifted into disillusionment when the executive secretary labeled him "intellectual" which is interpreted as meaning "bourgeois". Demirtürk remarkably sums up Wright's initial fondness of and final disappointment with the Communist Party: "Wright felt excited about the Chicago John Reed Club and the Communist Party to start with" (Demirtürk 275), which is evidenced by his being carried away by it as the narrative suggests: "It seems to me [Wright] that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role" (Wright in Demirtürk 275). Yet as Demirtürk reveals, "This belief became a fantasy when, as the executive secretary of the club, he had to confront the black communists' condemnation of him as 'intellectual,' a term used interchangeably with 'bourgeois'"<sup>113</sup> (275). Faced with such combination of political and intellectual dispossession from both black communism and American democracy, Wright broke away from them and found shelter in a French quarter where he found more freedom than in the whole United States (Carreiro 256), a country which yet claimed to be a democratic country.

Democracy is the power of the people by the people and for the people. So said, people are sovereign and choose the way in which society is organized and run. This organization is governed by a set of laws called Constitution which governs relations between individuals themselves, between them and the State or government they have chosen. In other words, all of these laws are the expression of the common will and any citizen putting himself at odds with this expression of the common will is brought before the competent courts chosen by the sovereign people to determine their guilt and pronounce the appropriate sanctions. If the law is the expression of the common will, this presupposes that all citizens are born free and equal in duties and rights before the law. But can the same be said of Wright's fictional republic? The answer is undoubtedly negative in view of the multiple forms of dispossession, such as injustices, that some characters experience.

For most of those who experience judicial dispossession, justice is only an illusion for them and, worse, is used as a powerful weapon capable of marginalizing them from political, economic and social life which could be described as legal marginalization. This situation is projected in *Black Boy* and especially in a more pronounced way in *Native Son*. In *Black Boy*, when Ella sues her husband Mr. Wright to court for marital irresponsibility, the case is bypassed

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<sup>113</sup> Ami E. Carreiro further explains that Wright was faced with suspicions and became "the target of malicious gossips" by many party members because, for them, Wright promoted his own individuality and identity to the detriment of the party's overarching principles (Carreiro 254). Yet in Wright's worldview, individuality and/or personal identity is more important than any other forms of association or organization, because all these entities cannot thrive without individual adherence. Talking about his opposition to the party, Wright, quoted by Carreiro, asserts that, "It was inconceivable to [him], though bred in the lab of Southern hate, that a man could not have his say" (254).

in a short period of time and Mr. Wright walks away freely despite his offense. Richard accounts for this bitter tribunal experience:

Finally, I heard my mother's name called; she rose and began weeping so copiously that she could not talk for a few moments; at last she managed to say that her husband had deserted her and two children, that her children were hungry, that she worked, that she was trying to raise them alone. Then my father was called; he came forward jauntily, smiling. He tried to kiss my mother, but she turned away from him. I only heard one sentence of what he said. 'I'm doing all I can, Your Honor,' he mumbled, grinning. Back at home my mother wept again and talked complainingly about the unfairness of the judge who had accepted my father's word. (*BB*, 35)

This scene epitomizes all the contempt and neglect of justice towards the problems of the marginalized since despite the relevance of Ella's argument, the judge does not take any binding action to force Mr. Wright to shoulder his responsibilities by taking care of his children. The same judicial contempt is self-evident in *Native Son*. Indeed, the body of Bessie Mears, a black girl killed by premeditation by Bigger, is lugged to justice but no judicial investigation is initiated to do her justice while Mary Dalton, a white girl inadvertently killed by the same Bigger, benefits from all the judicial arsenal to make Bigger pay for her murder to the last penny which unquestionably is the electric chair. To achieve this goal, his rights are violated since his trial is rushed so that he could not properly benefit from the defense of his lawyer Max who does not go through any procrastination to denounce this fact in court:

Your Honor [...] let me clear this thing up. As you know, the time granted me to prepare a defense for Bigger Thomas is pitifully brief, so brief as to be without example. This hearing was rushed to the top of the calendar so that this boy must be tried while the temper of the people is white-hot. (*NS*, 293)

*Native Son* illustrates how, instead of helping to elucidate the psychological mechanisms which lead some dispossessed people to delinquency or crime, the law and the entire judicial system have become instruments used by the dominant group to deprive poor citizens of their fundamental rights. In this respect, Capers suggests whiteness has become a property of Whites (individually and collectively) and they use law to protect it from non-Whites (Capers 138, 140). In reality, the law produced Bigger and justice shows him where to stand and when to obey. The same justice sentences him to death which, in line with Capers' point of view, digs out the inconsistency of the socio-political and legal systems (143). These systems are only used to maintain white power.

An in-depth reading of *Native Son* reveals the law representing white power is embodied by Buckley. Only Mrs. Dalton is the witness of Bigger's crime; yet she is blind, which suggests

American justice is blind and does not judge according to facts but according to what people think and say of “Negroes”. Without any tangible proof and under the pressure of the street, Buckley accuses Bigger of rape and murder. So what motive could lie strong behind this impatience and judicial haste against Bigger? For Capers, there is no shadow of doubt: “The law condemns Bigger to keep other Blacks from transgressing the color line that the same law drew between Blacks and Whites (137). In reality, Wright shows dispossessed people stand as shadowy figures at the margins of the law (Tuitt 202). The law itself creates violence by constructing two different people with some excluded from the legal system on the basis of their physical appearance, mainly skin color (205), and with others being part of it.

In Derrida’s analysis of one the scenes of Kafka’s *Before the Law*, a countryman intends to enter the law but is stopped and asked to wait by a gatekeeper. The latter ensures him there are other more powerful gatekeepers standing ahead and even though he lets him in, he will be faced with other more powerful and pitiless gatekeepers. During his waiting time, the gatekeeper allows him from time to time to peep at the people who enjoy the law inside it. Yet, the man waits in vain for granted access until he gets old. Surprised at not seeing anyone else joining him to ask for access, he finally asks the gatekeeper why nobody came and asked to enter the law. The gatekeeper tells him no-one would ever come because the door is only made for him. From Derrida’s analysis of this scene, the law stands for Whites’ superiority which is a text guarded by the gatekeeper (Derrida, 1992, 182-185). If we apply this reading grid to *Native Son*, American society is fragmented into two groups: those who are inside the law and those who are kept outside, in the margin of the law and society. Bigger belongs to the margin and, just like the countryman, is refused any access to the law. Jan and Mary have tricked him towards the law only to meet Buckley who stands for the pitiless gatekeeper denying him access. In such circumstances, one can agree with Derrida that, “moral law, judicial law and natural law are all implicated in the dramatization and discussion of the condition of being before the law, subject to an imperative to which unmediated access is impossible” (182). Indeed, Bigger’s unmediated attempt to get access to white privilege (the law) results in his death sentence, which shows the law itself is complicit in discrimination and is a form of dispossession.

The worst of legal-judicial dispossession can be seen in the various lynchings described in the three novels under study. While the country has strong legal instruments to resolve disputes between citizens, it is realized that the dominant group is using extra-judicial lynching to settle scores with some poor people who venture into their environment. From *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son* to *Black Boy*, lynching is rife against them. Although some have been

fortunate enough to be brought to justice, Wright shows how lynching (in *Uncle Tom Children*) and trying in a court of justice (in *Native Son*) as tools of justice are exactly the same. Even though Bigger is tried, he is lynched by the public, the mafia and by the law (Tuhkanen 131). Tuhkanen speaks, in this case, of subtle socialized lynching through the courtroom (132), while Elmer concludes that “American justice is fissured and damaged by script, gaze and spectacle” (772). In clearer terms, the judicial system is strongly influenced by the media and white folklore to such an extent that it fails to understand that Bigger’s actions are the result of various types of deprivations including socio-economic dispossession.

### 3. The Socio-Economic Aspects of Dispossession

Major characteristics of socio-economic dispossession are living and housing conditions. The free individual has a natural desire to move around at daytime and to rest at night under his roof. The roof represents for man his most private and protected environment in his daily life. We can agree that the house, therefore, represents the dignity of the individual. Yet in a society dominated by socio-economic inequalities, the most vulnerable layers are left to their fate in terms of getting access to housing and a decent living.

Access to decent housing in the daily lives of Wright’s characters is only a dream since they either have no means to afford decent housing or are simply deprived of this right by those who hold the financial power to build rental housing. Even though home remains an individual’s most private and intimate place, Wright willfully violates this privacy in order to present the living conditions of his characters to the reader as if on a screen and, by doing so, dig into his past life and memory. In *Black Boy*, Richard and his mother live in a poor house unworthy of respectable human beings due to lack of adequate means as Richard tells:

In Memphis we lived in a one-story brick tenement. The stone building and the concrete pavements looked bleak and hostile to me. The absence of green, growing things made the city seem dead. Living space for four of us, my mother, my brother, my father, and me, was a kitchen and a bedroom.” (*BB*, 16)

Wright goes deeper into the Thomas family’s intimacy in *Native Son* so as to give more details on the characters’ housing conditions:

An alarm clock clanged and in the dark and silent room. A bed spring creaked. [...] A surly grunt sounded above the tinny ring of metal. Naked feet swished dryly across the planks in the wooden floor and the clang ceased abruptly.  
‘Turn on the light, Bigger.’

‘Awright,’ came a sleep mumble.

Light flooded the room and revealed a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands. From abed to his right the woman spoke again:

‘Buddy, get up from there. I have got a big washing in my hands today and I want you-all out here.’

Another boy rolled from bed and stood up. The woman also rose and stood in her nightgown.

‘Turn your heads so I can dress,’ she said [...].

A brown-skinned girl in a cotton gown got up, stretched her arms above her head and yawned. Sleepily, she sat on a chair and fumbled with her stockings. The two boys kept their faces averted while their mother and sisters put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed; and the mother and sister did the same while the boys dressed. (NS, 15)

In this excerpt, readers might be taken aback by seeing the cramped nature of the Thomases’s house which forces the family members to ignore their privacy in a way that could lead the reader to compare their house to a stable or a henhouse where all the residents sleep together, quarrel together, have fun together, go to bed together, and make love in everyone’s eyes. Even though the reader does not fall into such a comparison, Bigger takes it upon himself to make a comparison between his house and that of the Daltons so as to highlight the terrible housing conditions of his family and the lack of intimacy he feels and does not accept:

This was much different from the Dalton’s home. Here all slept in one room; there he would have a room for himself alone. He smelt food cooking and remembered that one could not smell food cooking in the Dalton’s home, pots could not be heard rattling all over the house. Each person lived in one room and had a little world of his own. He hated his room and all the people in it, including himself. (NS, 105)

Bigger hates his own house because of its very poor quality, to the point that he even hates everyone who lives in that house. In Matthews’s words, “As Bigger sees it, the jumble of things, smells, and people in his family’s apartment [...] signals his rejection of his stifling domesticity” (Matthews 282), which impacts on his moral and self-awareness.

What characterizes people and differentiates them from animals is their awareness of themselves and of others. This consciousness confers or obliges them to shame and modesty, especially in the presence of the father, the mother, or the siblings. Poor housing conditions do not rob the Thomases of this moral conscience, but still force them to ignore it as they have no other alternative. By dint of seeing their own parents and siblings dress up in their unique and common room, the house-dispossessed people are sure to develop a psychological mechanism of self-shame which will be hard to forget. Usually, when a child inadvertently discovers his parents’ nudity, he grows up with this image stuck in his mind, which puts him or her under self-shame or shame of his parents. It should be noted that almost all the characters in our corpus



live in renting because they cannot afford the luxury of building houses for themselves. As a result, they cram together in precarious ghettos, a ghettoization caused not only by poverty but also discrimination as they are not even permitted to cycle or walk in privileged neighborhoods while the privileged group can go around poor areas as they please. Such discrimination is visible to the naked eye right from the onset of *Uncle Tom's Children*:

Negroes who have lived in the South know the dread of being caught alone upon the streets in white neighborhoods after the sun has set. In such a simple situation as this the plight of the Negro in America is graphically symbolized. While white strangers may be in these neighborhoods trying to get home, they can pass unmolested. But the color of the Negro's skin makes him easily recognizable, makes him suspect, converts him into defenseless target. (*UTC*, 10)

It can be seen from this excerpt that discrimination and injustice are blatant as the well-to-do social group has every right to be in the place of the poor one at any time without being troubled, while the poor social group cannot venture into the privileged neighborhood because they are suspected of being dangerous and contained as such by the law represented by the police. Richard's incident with the police is sufficiently illustrative of this reality as he testifies:

Late one Saturday night I made some deliveries in a white neighborhood. I was pedaling my bicycle back to the store as fast as I could, when a police car, swerving toward me, jammed me into the curbing. 'Get down and put up your hands!' the policemen ordered. I did. They climbed out of the car, guns drawn, faces set, and advanced slowly. [...] Finally one of them said: 'Boy, tell your boss not to send you out in white neighborhoods after sundown.' (*UTC*, 10-11)

As Richard's testimony reveals, it is formally forbidden for the unprivileged to go into white neighborhoods and failure to abide by this rule can lead the trespasser into troubles with the police. In the event Richard is talking about, he only escapes from police violence because they have not found anything compromising on him. Nevertheless, although he escapes from police violence, he is definitely warned never to venture into the white neighborhood again, which means his place is restricted in society.

What can a poor person do to obtain decent place to live in a context where places are predetermined by the hostile dominant group? There is no big deal, one could say in the case of Wright's characters who find themselves confined to neighborhoods like the Black Belt and, worse, to cramped homes that Matthews perceives as representing "the narrowness of their lives" (Mathews 281). The relationships between individuals in Wright's fictional microcosm are characterized by the fragmentation or balkanization of territories, the poor living in the

Black Belt and the privileged in the upscale neighborhoods of the city<sup>114</sup>. Wright allows us to perceive this fragmentation through Bigger's thoughts: "They keep us bottled up here like wild animals. [...] Black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat" (*NS*, 203). Reverend Taylor in *Uncle Tom's Children* would not say otherwise since he lives "at the bottom of the valley [where] lay[s] a cluster of bleak huts with window panes red-lit from dying sunlight" (*UTC*, 130). Despite the indecency and the smallness of their housing, some cannot even manage to honor their monthly rents and find themselves dispossessed on several occasions by landlords as Richard informs us in *Black Boy*:

Inability to pay the rent forced us to move into a house perched atop high logs in a section of the town where flood waters came. [...] Again paying rent became a problem and we moved nearer the center of town, where I found a job in a pressing shop. [...] Yet again we moved, this time to the outskirts of town, near a wide stretch of railroad tracks to which, each morning before school, I would take a sack and gather coal to heat our frame house. (*BB*, 94)

It could logically be said that given the small size of the houses allocated to the poor, rent prices should be proportionately affordable. However, things do not turn out for the poor as in Cartesian logical reasoning. Despite the small size of their houses, landlords practice tariff unfairness which makes rent prices disproportionately high compared to the quality of the houses. It takes just a short reading of a little conversation between Bigger and Gus in *Native Son* to be convinced:

'Kinda warm today.'  
'Yeah,' Gus said.  
'You get more heat from this sun than from them old radiators at home.'  
'And they always knocking at your door for money.'  
'I will be glad when summer comes.' (*NS*, 24)

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<sup>114</sup> In the South, the Black Belt designates a chain of counties where thousands of Black Americans lived and still live. This belt was characterized by poor housing, insanitation, lack of education, poverty, unemployment and juvenile delinquency. The Cotton Belt regroups Southern States such as Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas and Mississippi. This belt was mostly populated by Blacks who used to work in cotton fields and processing companies. With the advent of Jim Crow laws which left hardly no hope for Blacks, they were kept to work in plantations in conditions which resembled those which prevailed during slavery. The Cotton Belt was also characterized by poor housing and menial employment for Blacks while the means of production remained in the hands of well-to-do Whites. It becomes, therefore, clear that segregation could be found at local and national levels as Wright experienced and addressed it in his writing where the balkanization of territories according to skin color and social class took all its meaning.

One can see from this conversation that housing conditions are not good while landlords keep on claiming for money and charge the poor tenants to pay higher rents than Whites as revealed by Max's question to Mr. Dalton at court:

Why is it that you charge the Thomas family and other Negro families more rent for the same kind of house you charge whites? [...] Why is it that you exact an exorbitant rent of eight dollars per month from the Thomas family for one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people sleep and eat? (*NS*, 257)

As can be seen, the poor families pay more than is necessary and this remains the only condition to hope for a roof since those who do not agree would not only be evicted from their houses but will find none elsewhere, because the other quarters occupied by the rich are prohibited to them even if they could have the means to rent a house there. The case of Mr. Dalton sufficiently informs this reality since he only rents houses to the poor people inside the Black Belt, a poor neighborhood where most of the poor people are confined "in concrete geographical terms" (Tuhkanen 127). The outside of the Black Belt belongs to the better-off who excel in upper market economy through the production of goods and services totally inaccessible to the poor people.

In the context of socio-economic dispossession, dispossessed people cannot venture into the world of goods and services which is the badge of high economy and the preservation of the richest people who reign there without the slightest sharing. Among the goods and services provided in the upper economy are hospitals and tourist travelling. To express the idea of dispossession, Wright highlights an image of desire and deprivation embodied by characters like Bigger and Gus. Indeed, these two characters dream of tourism by air travel but as the narrative shows, this dream remains a dream and can never come true in a context of socio-economic discrimination and deprivation:

They squinted at a tiny ribbon of unfolding vapor spelled out the word USE:  
The plane was so far away that at times the strong glare of the sun blanked it from sight.  
[...]  
'Them white boys sure can fly,' Gus Said.  
'Yeah,' Bigger said wistfully, 'they got a chance to do everything.' [...]  
'I could fly one of them things if I had a chance,' Bigger mumbled reflectively, as though talking to himself.  
'If you wasn't black and you had some money [...],' Gus said. (*NS*, 25)

It is particularly interesting that when Bigger says he wishes he could fly a plane, Gus reminds him it would be possible on condition he were not black, that he got money and that he were permitted to go to aviation school. Here, Wright points at exclusion based on race, class, and access to education. One way to access modern goods and services such as flying a plane is to

become white (Tolentino 384). Once aware of the impossibility of flying a plane, Bigger and Gus revise their ambitions downwards to becoming envious of white men's cars, but they still cannot afford to get them because they have been put out of the socio-economic system. When they see a black fancy car, Bigger imitates it singing, "Zooooooooooooom" (NS, 30), which means Bigger and Gus are envious of white men's cars but, unfortunately for them, the car "shot past them at high speed, turned a corner a few blocks away" (NS, 30) as though to suggest that their dream of driving a car has just shot past them at high speed. As their dream cannot come true even by practicing passing, economically-dispossessed people can only travel in trains and away from honorable places as is the case with Richard in *Black Boy* and Mann in *Uncle Tom's Children* who loses his wife due to the lack of transportation means as it has already been shown earlier. To have access to goods and services, one must have financial power that poor people and Wrightean characters obviously do not have.

Those who are submitted to economic dispossession have no access to finance because the prevailing economic system is organized so that they cannot save enough money to support themselves. In an urbanized city like Chicago, the lack of money represents a major handicap in individuals' everyday lives since they can fall prey to any difficult and despondent situations. Yet these situations have become part of the daily lives of Wright's characters. Starting first with Mann in *Uncle Tom's Children*, the lack of financial means is manifested by his obligation to sell his mule at a low price to buy a boat and save his pregnant wife in labor and then to accept a stolen boat from a white man named Heartfield:

Naw. We jus have t wait, thas all. Lawd, ahm scared she'll never have tha baby widout a doctah. Her hips is jus too little. [...] I sent Bob wid the mule t ry t git a boat. No boat. No money. No doctah. Nothing t eat. N Bob ain back here yit. Lulu could not last much longer that way. [...]  
'Brother Mann! Its Bob! [...]'  
'Who bought the mule?' Mann asked.  
'Ol man Bowman bought the mule, but he didnt wanna pay me much.'  
Bob paused and pulled out a crumpled wad of one-dollar bills.  
'He gimme fifteen dollars.' (UTC, 55-58)

In fact, Bowman pays the mule at a low price because he is aware of the financial precariousness which compels Mann to sell it. Bowman takes advantage of Mann's hopeless situation to buy his mule at an insignificant sum of fifteen dollars, which aggravates Mann's financial shortage

while being reminiscent of the “40 acres and a mule” promise to former slaves<sup>115</sup>. The lack of financial means also forces Richard in *Black Boy* to undertake to sell his dog Betsy in order to have money and buy food to eat.

As though financial dispossession was not enough, discrimination is rife on the housing market where poor people pay more tenement fees than privileged ones. Worse, this price discrimination has even crept down to the lowest level of basic needs and manifested itself in the price of bread. Bread costs cheaper in white neighborhood, “five cents a loaf but across the ‘line’ where white folks lived it sold for four” (NS, 203). There is, however, a line keeping the likes of Bigger as a black person from paying in the white neighborhood (NS, 203) because of economic inequality and discrimination. Economic inequality is expressed on the screen when Bigger and Jack go to the theater where they hear the commentator declare: “Here are the daughters of the rich taking sunbaths in the sands of Florida. This little collection of debutantes represents over four billion dollars of America’s wealth and over fifty of America’s leading families” (NS, 38), which infers that a minority enjoys over half of American leading families’ wealth while poor children like Richard lack fundamental needs such as food and healthcare to ensure their growth into adulthood.

Some of the fundamental needs of children are food and healthcare security. A child cannot have cognitive or socio-affective flourishing if these basic biological needs are not met. However, insuring these needs appropriately presupposes a stable financial situation permitting the child’s parents or community to meet these needs. Yet Richard, in *Black Boy*, is far from meeting his basic biological needs such as food and healthcare security because of financial dispossession.

Financial dispossession results in hunger for Richard and it is so ubiquitous in his life that he begins to feel its meaning for the body as he describes its presence like his bedfellow in *Black Boy*: “I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly” (BB, 11). Richard cannot understand why he cannot get something to eat when he is hungry. Unable to explain to him the situation, his mother tells him to wait for “God to send

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<sup>115</sup> The « 40 acres and a mule » promise to former slaves was a policy proposed by Republican Abraham Lincoln during Reconstruction to endow former slaves with lands and mules so that they could freely settle and practice agriculture. Unfortunately for former slaves, Andrew Johnson, the successor of Abraham Lincoln, called it into question and former slaves were re-dispossessed of their right to land ownership, which pushed thousands of them to migrate with their mules to towns in search of better living conditions. Johnson’s decision marked, to some extent, the failure of the “40 acres and a mule” policy. Wright glimpses at this historical event in *Uncle Tom’s Children* to show that once in town, the situation of former slaves did not change any better as they remained landless and were obliged to sell off their mules just as Mann does in *Uncle Tom’s Children* to come to terms with his socio-economic problems. For more details on the “40 acres and a mule” policy, see Henry Louis Gates’s “The Truth Behind ‘40 Acres and a Mule’” (2013).

some food” (*BB*, 12). His mother later lets him understand that his absent father is responsible for the financial crisis in the family and the subsequent food shortage, making “the image of [his] father become associated with [his] pangs of hunger” (*BB*, 12). As Bandha and Bandha suggest, “[t]he effects of dispossession are myriad, and have physical, material and psychic dimensions that are impossible to disentangle” (Bandha, Bandha 10). That is the reason why Richard’s hunger may be two-dimensional. At the onset of the novel, hunger has a literal meaning, which is the result of financial dispossession depriving his mother of sufficient means to pay for the family’s vital supplies after Mr. Wright has abandoned them. However, as we move deeper into Richard’s life, we come to understand his hunger also takes on a figurative meaning as the study will later demonstrate. In reality, Richard is not only hungry for food, but he is also hungry for education and justice, most specifically after the killing of his uncle Hoskins.

Financial dispossession becomes clear when Hoskins is killed, looted from his business and his wife threatened to leave the place, compelling Richard to run away from a pleasant life back to a hungry life. While Richard has started regaining food security in Hoskins’s house, his assassination compels him to sell his lovely dog Betsy in West Helena so as to afford to buy food as already revealed above. Even though Richard tells the young white lady that he is selling his dog for food, she refuses to pay it at even a dollar, proposing just no more than ninety-seven cents, and arguing that “one dollar is too much for a nigger” (*BB*, 60). Yet Richard really needs money to support his sick mother.

Financial dispossession is perceived once again when Richard’s mother becomes sick and can no longer work and meet the family’s needs. This unhappy episode of Richard’s life becomes appalling to him in a way that, instead of being focused on his schooling, he is compelled to embrace menial works such as “carrying lunches to the men, carting wood in café, delivering clothes to hotels, and sweeping floor” (*BB*, 72). This financial dispossession leads Richard and his mother to become unable to pay for the rent and to “move into a house perched atop high logs in a section of the town where flood waters came” (*BB*, 72).

Following his mother’s sickness, Richard is brought to his grand family where he is sent to school. Nevertheless, once he enters the Jim Hill public school, financial dispossession comes from his own grand family as he is even deprived of any school uniform, a bitter experience he reports: “My clothing became so shabby that I was ashamed to go to school” (*BB*, 125). In fact, such a situation occurs because Richard has no financial means to renew his clothing following Aunt Granny’s depriving him of the right to work on Saturdays. But how is it that one social group ends up in financial destitution while their neighbors across the street separated by the

color line enjoy all the financial privileges? The answer is obvious, however. In order to accumulate money, one must have access to a decent job which is yet glaringly lacking among financially-dispossessed people because of racial relations and segregation. Without work, man is nothing since it is work that gives him his socio-economic means of subsistence and allows him to keep his dignity and respectability in society. Without work, man runs the risk of falling into vice as corroborated by this popular saying which goes that an empty brain is the devil's castle. Nevertheless, it is not enough to work to get out of socio-economic difficulties, because slaves worked well on plantations, but that did not give them any respectability or any dignity whatsoever. The work that frees man is the one which allows him to acquire basic means to meet his needs. Wright's destitute characters are aware of this socio-economic reality but the business world is made up of discriminations which, to paraphrase Payne, lead to blocked economic opportunity held by structural inequality obliging them to take low-paid jobs (Payne 124).

In Wright's fictional milieu, the business environment is divided into two unequal entities. The rich who own the means of production and the poor and destitute who provide free labor. In other words, the economic system is organized in such a way as to dispossess the poor and permanently keep them as low paid or unpaid workers in order to perpetuate the wealth of those in financial power. The poor are exploited to feed the formal economy while their economic contribution remains marginalized (They, Bonnet 88). Under these conditions, the wealth produced by the hands of the poor seems to be within reach but untouchable (90). Since they generally lack professional education, poor people always find themselves in menial works where they are humiliated. Despite this situation, some set up hypocritical rituals to make people believe in their allegiance while they hate the insolence of the bourgeois classes (91), as They and Bonnet remark. These points are confirmed by Richard in *Black Boy*:

After reading I would watch the black porter perform his morning rituals: He would get a mop, bucket, soap flakes, water, then would pause dramatically, roll his eyes to the ceiling and sing out. [...] He was proud of his race and indignant about its wrongs. But in the presence of whites [his bosses] he would play the role of a clown of the most debased and degraded type. One day he needed twenty-five cents to buy his lunch. A white man who worked in the building stepped into the elevator and waited to be lifted to his floor. Shorty sang in a low mumble, smiling, rolling his eyes, looking at the white man roguishly. [...] This sonofabitch sure needs a quarter," Shorty sang, grimacing, clowning, ignoring the white man's threat. (*BB*, 249)

In addition to being forced to play clown often to save their odd jobs, economically-dispossessed people witness or experience debasing treatments at work by their bosses because

they are almost considered as less than human. Wright's testimony in a related vein tells a lot about such debasing working conditions:

When the bell-boy were busy I was often called to assist them. As many of the room in the hotel were occupied by prostitutes I was constantly called to carry them liquor and cigarette. These women were nude most of the time. They did not bother about clothing, even for bell-boy. When you went into their room you were supposed to take their nakedness for granted, as though it startled you no more than a blue vase or a red rug. Your presence awoke in them no sense of shame, for you were not regarded as human. I remember one incident vividly. A new woman, a huge snowy blonde, took a room of my floor. She was in bed with a thick-set man; both were nude and uncovered. She slid out of bed and waddled across the floor to get her money from the dresser drawer. I watch her. [...] I learned to play that role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live. (*UTC*, 11)

In addition to this testimony which provides sufficient information on working conditions, it should be noted that these conditions are most often booked for the poor people who constitute the majority of the illiterate and unskilled black population. Anderson and Halcoussis explain it further: "Black schools were low standard and could not train Blacks for the highly competitive labor market" (Halcoussis 9), all of which is confirmed in *Black Boy* and *Native Son* where the main characters never reach high school level.

When Richard attempts to use his low level of education to gain access to skilled work, he is automatically faced with discrimination in the workplace because the ruling class perceives it as a risk of emancipation if the dominated group get decent jobs. It is in such a context that Peace reminds Richard he must know how to stay in his place if he wants to keep his job. "Say, are yuh crazy, you black bastard? [...] This is a white man's work around here, and you better watch yourself" (*UTC*, 6), Peace warns Richard when he claims for the right to learn more in the optical shop. Analyzing this scene, James R. Giles suggests that "Blacks are dispossessed of decent jobs and are totally dependent of Whites, which strengthens the supremacy of the oppressors" (Giles 277). This means, in addition to poverty due to the lack of qualification, there is also the oppression of the bosses who feel their economic superiority threatened in case there are equal opportunities in employment. From this point of view, Maaloum maintains that Richard's willingness to work at the optical shop as a qualified man is a threat to white supremacy. By wanting to learn a skilled job, Richard intends to quit the economic system set by Whites (Maaloum 114). This situation teaches Richard that he has nobody but himself to rely on (Vogel 196). To thwart socio-economic rebels like Richard, the disproportion of jobs is created and maintained (Carreiro 248). Even though he becomes aware that "he had no hope whatever of becoming a professional man" (*BB*, 277), Richard strives to



denounce these disproportions by showing that the major cause of inequality stems from exploitative capitalism.

It seems difficult to speak of dispossession linked to materialistic capitalism without mentioning the specific case of women who are doubly penalized in the socio-economic field. In this system where only the excessive exploitation of the workforce matters, women are not only victims of the oppression of the bourgeois class as lower-class people but also by the whole society as women. This can be put on a par with Sondra Guttman's strong contention that "Women are exploited, raped, and killed in a capitalistic society that is also patriarchal, because they are women and not just because they are poor" (Guttman 191). On close examination, it is safe to say that Guttman is right since in the three novels, no women are active on the job market. They are happy about staying at home where they are victims of men's oppression (as this is the case of Johnny-Boy's mother in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Mary in *Native Son* and Ella in *Black Boy*, including torture (as this is the case of Silas' wife in *Uncle Tom's Children*), deadly procreations (as this is the case of Mann's wife in *Uncle Tom's Children*) and deadly rapes (as this is the case of Mary and Bessie in *Native Son*). In this respect, one can agree that, just as Barroso-Fontanel says of Morrison's work, Wright's novels unravel the "sexual minoring which ostracizes black women by relegating them to the most peripheral space of the margin standing at the crossroads of race and gender"<sup>116</sup> (Barroso-Fontanel 12).

When considering Wright's perception of the capitalistic world as an industrial machine where only material acquisition rules and determines the relationships between individuals, it comes out that women are marginalized from this machine of production and black women are doubly marginalized. From this point of view, Kenneth Kinnamon rightly declares, "Women in this world of industrial city remain relegated to the folk culture, since they continue to occupy family roles as domestics or service employees, in opposition to the potential brotherhood of class consciousness" (Kinnamon 825).

The acute capitalistic system which exploits the poor hands to feed the rich pushes thousands of destitute people to migrate northward in search of better socio-economic well-being. Much to their dismay, they come up against capitalistic materialism to which they find it difficult to come to terms. Daniel Walden's study reveals in more details how capitalistic dispossession gave rise to the Great Migration northward:

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<sup>116</sup> « Elle [l'œuvre de Toni Morrison] dévoile également un deuxième niveau de minoration au sein de la minorité africaine-américaine, celui de la minoration sexuelle qui ostracise les femmes noires en les reléguant à l'espace le plus périphérique de la marge, situé au point d'intersection de la race et du genre. »

Of course blacks left the South because of the execrable conditions that they knew and lived with. [...] At the same time there was a widespread belief among the Southern blacks that [...] this [the North] was Columbus' land that good jobs, high pay, respect for the law, and award for hard work awaited those who came. [...] The system of share tenancy and crop liens often prevented black farmers from making profit while unscrupulous planters and merchants exploited the ignorant tenants. Despite a slow growth of industrialization, the Blacks rarely shared in the emergent South. [...] From 1910 to 1920, some 454,000 blacks from the South went north; from 1920 to 1930, 749,000 migrated northward. (Walden 35)

As Walden presents us with the facts on the Great Migration, thousands of Blacks fled the South for the North hoping to find better working conditions, tired of living in the vicious circle of sharecropping which cannot guarantee them any future prospect whatsoever. While migrating northward, "their identity was not so much a product of who they were but who they would become" (Berlin 50). Explaining the importance of the Great Migration, Ira Berlin states:

If greatness is measured by size, the Great Migration was great indeed. Between America's entry into the European war and the stock market crash in 1929, black men and women left the South at an average rate of 500 per day, or more than 15,000 per month. The evacuation of the black belt was particularly striking. [...] By 1930, more than 1.3 million resided outside the South, nearly triple the number at the turn of the century. (154)

Richard's father is one of the victims of sharecropping as many years later, "when [he] visited him on the plantation, he was standing against the sky, smiling toothlessly, his hair whitened, his body bent, his eyes glazed with dim recollection<sup>117</sup> [...] (BB, 42). To escape this lack of perspective, Richard and his brother Leon take part in this great migration in *Black Boy*: "My brother obtained a job and we began to save toward the trip north, plotting our time, setting attempt dates for departure" (BB, 276). Yet once in the North, Richard and his brother soon realize that the various forms of dispossession are rampant in the whole United States and that they negatively impact on everyone's daily life. To show this in his characters' lives, and to make an impact on his readers, Wright used a set of literary techniques such as symbolism and metaphors to reveal his personal vision and "the rupture of the world," to paraphrase Derrida in *L'Écriture et la différence* (1967). Thus, by using his own experience of affective, educational, social and psychological lack, Wright made his reader aware of all forms of dispossession suffered by Blacks.

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<sup>117</sup> When Andrew Johnson questioned the "40 acres and a mule" policy, he returned lands to the Whites who originally owned them before Emancipation. As a result, Blacks fell back into sharecropping and could no longer hope for owning lands and improving their socio-economic status whatsoever. Richard's father's situation can be linked to the « 40 acres and a mule » policy. Wright portrays his father in *Black Boy* as the epitome of all the Blacks who were the victims of Johnson's decision and the subsequent failure of the "40 acres and a mule" promise to former slaves which forced them back into profitless sharecropping.

## 4. The Symbolism of Dispossession

In *L'Écriture et la différence*, Derrida (1967) wrote :

This experience of conversion which establishes the literary act (writing or reading) is of such a kind that the very words of separation and exile, always designating a rupture and a journey within the world, cannot manifest it directly but only to indicate it by a metaphor whose genealogy would alone deserve the whole of the reflection. Because it is about an exit from the world, towards a place which is neither a non-place nor another world, neither a utopia, nor an alibi. [...] Only the pure absence, and not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything where any presence announces itself, can inspire, in other words work, then make people work. The pure book is naturally turned towards the horizon of this absence which is, beyond or below the genius of all wealth, its own and primary content<sup>118</sup>. (17)

What Derrida points out, here, is undecidability that is inherent in writing and reading, which means one cannot decide on a fixed meaning when writing or reading. While one writes or reads about the world, one is actually writing or reading a metaphor of it, because the world is not present in the book. The presence of the world in the book only indicates its absence, an absence in which its presence is mirrored. Metaphorically expressed, the narrative is the presence of absence. More generally, Derrida points to the impossibility of providing a universal interpretation of the narrative, because what one reads is only a metaphor of presence. In this respect, meaning is to be pursued in the horizon of absence, which makes meaning out of reach because when one tries to reach it, it differs. This is the Derridean process of *différance*. In Wright's works, the world is described thanks to metaphors. As meaning is always in constant *différance*, according to Derrida's assumption, the current analysis of symbols cannot reach universal meaning. It stems from my own perception and understanding of Wright's symbolism as a basic reader. Here, I propose my own view and analysis of the Wrightean representation and imagery of dispossession.

One of the symbolic elements of dispossession is Mrs. Dalton's blindness in *Native Son*. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Dalton's blindness separates her from the visible environment, which

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<sup>118</sup> « Cette expérience de conversion qui instaure l'acte littéraire (écriture ou lecture) est d'une telle sorte que les mots mêmes de séparation et d'exile, désignant toujours une rupture et un cheminement à l'intérieur de monde, ne peuvent la manifester directement mais seulement l'indiquer par une métaphore dont la généalogie mériterait à elle seul le tout de la réflexion. Car il s'agit d'une sortie hors du monde, vers un lieu qui n'est ni un non-lieu ni un autre monde, ni une utopie, ni un alibi. [...] Seule l'absence pure, et non l'absence de ceci ou de cela, mais l'absence de tout où s'annonce toute présence, peut inspirer, autrement dit travailler, puis faire travailler. Le livre pur est naturellement tourné vers l'orient de cette absence qui est, par-delà ou en deçà de la génialité de toute richesse, son contenu propre et premier. »

obliges her to entrust her husband Mr. Dalton with all her business administration. The origin of Mrs. Dalton's blindness is unknown but this physical disorder deprives her of many things and is even linked to the misfortune that Bigger provokes in the family. Since Mrs. Dalton is dispossessed of sight by circumstances of life which are not elucidated by the narrative, she has yet nobody to guide her steps at home. She moves in the house thanks to her hands and her mind which she uses to feel her physical environment to avoid bumping into a physical entity. This blindness is important in relation to the murder of Mary by Bigger. When she shows up in Mary's room, she blindly catches Bigger kissing her daughter. Although being aware of Mrs. Dalton's blindness, the fear of whiteness leads Bigger to stiffen Mary with a pillow to keep her from reacting to her mother's presence. "But why does Bigger fall into panic in the presence of a blind white woman whereas he could have simply withdrawn promptly without being noticed?" one may wonder. The answer to this questions lies behind Wright's motive for setting up such a scene. Actually, Wright symbolizes with this scene the fearful, terrific, heinous and violent relationship which prevails between Whites and Blacks, as Sparknotes editors explain:

Mrs. Dalton's blindness plays a crucial role in the circumstances of Bigger's murder of Mary, as it gives Bigger the escape route of smothering Mary to keep her from revealing his presence in her bedroom. On a symbolic level, this set of circumstances serves as a metaphor for the vicious circle of racism in American society: Mrs. Dalton's inability to see Bigger causes him to turn to violence, just as the inability of whites to see blacks as individuals causes blacks to live their lives in fear and hatred. Mrs. Dalton's blindness represents the inability of white Americans as a whole to see Black Americans as anything other than the embodiment of their media-enforced stereotypes. Wright echoes Mrs. Dalton's literal blindness throughout the novel in his descriptions of other characters who are figuratively blind for one reason or another. Indeed, Bigger later realizes that, in a sense, he has been blind, unable to see whites as individuals rather than a single oppressive mass. (Sparknotes, 2020)

Wright uses physical blindness to expose the dramatic situation in which Blacks and Whites are blind to each other's subjectivity and rather swim in mutual stereotyping which drags along interracial violence. Blindness is tantamount to unprivileged status and leads to silence and isolation. Bigger considers Whites as blind and sees himself as privileged compared to them (Onunkwo *et al.* 107), because they cannot discover his guilt in Mary's murder. Whites' blindness to Bigger's individuality has led them to isolate him from social and economic welfare. By the same token, Bigger's incapacity to see Whites as individuals but as an oppressive force leads him to dispossess an innocent white girl of her life as a vengeance on the whole white community which brings him to court and claims his life. Though some of his community members such as Reverend Hammond and friends such as Max try to save Bigger, Wright ironically presents them as contributing to his sense of dispossession. Max proposes to

defend Bigger as a lawyer but he himself is blind to the society in which he lives in and is unable to understand his explanation of Bigger's crime (110). Though Reverend Hammond tries to save Bigger's soul by giving him a cross to rely on, Wright subtly turns this cross into a symbol of spiritual dispossession as can be understood from Cliffsnotes Editors' comment:

The Christian cross traditionally symbolizes compassion and sacrifice for a greater good, and indeed Reverend Hammond intends as much when he gives Bigger a cross while he is in jail. Bigger even begins to think of himself as Christlike, imagining that he is sacrificing himself in order to wash away the shame of being black, just as Christ died to wash away the world's sins. Later, however, after Bigger sees the image of a burning cross, he can only associate crosses with the hatred and racism that have crippled him throughout his life. As such, the cross in *Native Son* comes to symbolize the opposite of what it usually signifies in a Christian context. (Cliffsnotes, 2020)

One can clearly see that even though Bigger initially deludes himself with the cross, he ends up becoming aware that this piety object cannot save him in a context of social determinism, that is a social context in which his fate is the electric chair, hence his throwing the cross away.

In the hospital where Richard works, the lab uses dogs for research purposes. Upon regaining consciousness, the dogs howl silently, and Richard sees the dogs as symbols of silent suffering, just as he himself experiences in his daily relationship with society. Just like the dogs that cannot bark in the laboratory because of the sedating product, Richard is always a victim of attempts to force him into silence. This attempt not only comes from the white community who makes use of violence to silence all black people, but also and more curiously from his own family who resents his consciousness-raising questions and actions. When the dogs are not sedated and can bark, as the narrative reveals, they are symbolized as the associates of dispossessors as they play a significant role in catching and dispossessing Bobo of his life in *Uncle Tom's Children*:

A dog barked. He stiffened. It barked again. He balls himself into a knot at the bottom of the hole, waiting. Then he heard the patter of the dog feet [...].  
From the side of the hill he heard the dog barking furiously. He listened. There was more than one now. There were many and they were barking their throats out.  
'Hush. Ah hear them dogs!'  
'When theys barking like tha theys foun something!'  
'Here they come over the the hill!'  
'WE GOT IM! WE GOT IM!'  
There came a roar. That must be Bobo; tha must be Bobo [...]. (*UTC*, 47)

As can be understood, it would have been difficult for the white mob to flush Bobo out without the intervention of the dogs. By barking furiously around Bobo's hiding place, the dogs permit the white mob to find him, and to dispossess him of his life as he is lynched and burnt alive.

The image of the dog is really ubiquitous in the lives of the characters who have nothing. This is normal if we consider the privileged relationship between humans and dogs. The dog is a faithful companion of man and plays a key role in family security. Nevertheless, Wright, in his deconstructionist logic, perverts the dog symbolism in the fictional lives of his characters. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, the dogs significantly contribute to Bobo's capture (*UTC*, 50). In *Black Boy*, for instance, the dog of the brickyard boss is always around at the workplace but instead of contributing to security, it just disturbs the workers to such an extent that they stone it away. Nonetheless, the dog keeps on coming back and ends up biting Richard who recounts his own experience:

I had but one fear: a dog. He was owned by the boss of the brickyard and haunted the clay aisles, snapping, growling. The dog had been wounded many times, for the black workers were always hurling bricks at it. Whenever I saw the animal, I would take a brick from my load and toss it at him; he would slink away, only to appear again, showing several teeth. Several of the Negroes had been bitten and had been ill; the boss had been asked to leash the dog, but he refused. One afternoon I was wheeling my barrow toward the pond when something sharp sank into my thigh. I whirled; the dog crouched a few feet away, snarling. I had been bitten [...]. I went to the office to report that the boss's dog had bitten me [...].

'They tell me my dog bit you,' he said.

'Yes, Sir.'

I pulled down my trousers and he looked.

'Humnnn,' he grunted, then laughed. 'A dog bite can't hurt a nigger.' (*BB*, 179-180)

From this scene, it can be seen that the black workers usually throw stones at the dog, because it symbolizes the Whites' possession that they wish to take away from them. Failing to strip their white boss of what he possesses, black workers transfer their violence on his dog. To make an impact on his reader, Wright portrays the dog as a human being as he uses the personal pronoun "he" instead of "it". Through this strategy, Wright wants the dog to symbolize the white boss. That is the reason why the dog the writer describes takes on human qualities to permanently bother the workers with impunity, just like the boss. The dog is not punished for biting Richard at work, just as the possessors of the means of production harm the workers at will without being troubled. The only thing the workers can do in such circumstances is to brood over their pain and secretly curse the boss as some of Richard's co-workers do:

'Sonofabitch!'

'He'll get this someday!'

'Boy, their hearts are hard!'

'Lord, a white man'll do anything!'

'Break up that prayer meeting!' The white straw boss yelled. The barrows rolled again. (*BB*, 180)

The narrative really enables the reader to understand that the dog, instead of being man's faithful companion, has become a negative symbol. It can still be remembered that when Richard is still younger, hunger obliges him to walk from door to door with a view to sell his dog Betsy. When he arrives at a white woman's door, she wants to pay it at an insignificant sum of ninety-seven cents instead of one dollar as set by Richard. "I love this dog [...] and am going to buy her. I haven't got a dollar. All I have is ninety-seven cents" (*BB*, 78), the woman tells Richard. When the latter refuses, she retorts, "Here's your dog [...]. Now, get away from here! You're just about the craziest nigger boy I ever did see!" (*BB*, 80). Indeed, Richard fails to sell his dog and is supposed to stay poor and deprived of food. Despite being one of his dearest possessions, Richard is obliged to sell it for an insignificant sum of money. Richard's dog is the symbol of economic dispossession which, to a larger extent, compels the poor to sell off what is dear to them for their survival.

The dog is not the only animal which troubles the characters' peace of mind. The cat, too, despite being a small animal, also brings about problems and is a source of tensions between the characters. In *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, this domestic animal destabilizes instead of bringing pleasure or chasing away feelings of loneliness. In *Black Boy*, the cat is at the origin of tensions arising between Richard and his father. In fact, the cat keeps on mewing in the house, preventing Mr. Wright from resting. Mr. Wright nervously orders his son to kill the cat to catch some sleep and Richard obeys him literally. Richard does so because he identifies with the cat's situation. Just as the cat is deemed to die because of disturbance, Richard is also forbidden to disturb by his childish plays which yet appear to be part of his psychological needs as a child. Here, the cat scene recalls Edgar Allan Poe's "Black Cat" (1847). In this short story, the drunken narrator, who initially loved animals and his wife, finally ends up killing his cat, Pluto, and his own wife out of anger and hatred. Similarly, Richard kills the cat out of anger and hatred, and wishes his father was dead. Clearly, Wright's cat scene in *Black Boy* echoes Poe's "Black Cat" which addresses the complex relationship between love and hatred, innocence and guilt following the fatal maltreatment of the cat in both works and subtly points at intertextuality and Wright's rich intertext.

In *Native Son*, though Bigger is not a child like Richard, the cat plays an important role in his mental and psychological balance in the Daltons, especially after his killing of Mary. Right from Bigger's entrance into Mr. Dalton's house for his job interview, the cat warns against him, as though to prevent Bigger from being hired:

'Put your cap here,' said Mr. Dalton, indicating a place on his desk.

‘Yessuh.’

Then he was stone-still; the white cat bounded past him and leaped upon the desk; it sat looking at him with large placid eyes and mewed plaintively.

‘What’s the matter, Kate,’ Mr. Dalton asked, stroking the cat’s fur and smiling. (NS, 50)

Here the cat plays its role as a domestic animal and warns his boss against Bigger’s presence in the family. Yet, as the narrative shows, Mr. Dalton remains neglectful as he just strokes the cat and smiles. The cat’s attempts to prevent Bigger from being chosen for the job therefore fail but it does not mean it will leave him alone in the future. On the contrary, the Daltons’ cat controls Bigger’s gestures in the house as can be noticed from the narrative:

Mrs. Dalton, in flowing white clothes was standing stone-still in the middle of the kitchen floor [...]. To Bigger, her face seemed to be capable of hearing in every pore of the skin and listening always to some low voice speaking. Sitting quietly on the floor beside was the cat, its large black eyes fastened upon him. It made him uneasy just to look at her and that white cat, he was about to close the door and tiptoe softly back down the stairs when she spoke. (NS, 60)

As the cat keeps on watching him, Bigger associates it with Mrs. Dalton. The white cat both symbolizes her impaired eyes but also vision. Indeed, as the white cat evokes Mrs. Dalton’s blindness, Bigger feels protected from being discovered because the cat is nothing else than the symbol of white people’s blindness to his murder. Nevertheless, the attitude of Mr. Dalton’s white cat troubles him and completely dispossesses him of his new serenity as the furnace scene shows. After killing Mary, Bigger decides to burn her body into ashes in the home furnace. Everything appears to be working according to his plans when the cat appears, which upsets him. A close look at the scene reveals how the white pet is able to destabilize Bigger’s apparent psychological balance:

A noise made him whirl. Two green burning pools, pools of accusation and guilt, stared at him from a white blur that sat perched upon the edge of the trunk. His mouth opened in a silent scream and his body became hotly paralyzed. It was the white cat and its round green eyes gazed past him at the white face hanging limply from the fiery furnace door. God! He closed his eyes and swallowed. Should he catch the cat and kill it and put it in the furnace, too? He made a move. The cat stood up. Its white fur bristled. Its back arched. He tried to grab it and it bounded past him with a long wail of fear and scampered up the steps and through the door and out of sight. (NS, 84)

As can be seen, the cat is the only dweller of Mr. Dalton’s house which is vigilant and pays attention to Bigger and his gestures. From Bigger’s entrance until he cuts off Mary’s body into pieces and burns them in the furnace, the cat has always been warning its masters but they remain heedless because of their physical and psychological blindness to Bigger’s subjectivity. Mrs. Dalton is incapable of perceiving who Bigger really is and Mr. Dalton sees him as a meek



black boy, not as an individual capable of posing such a horrific act as killing. In *Black Boy*, however, a meek black boy has this capacity as Richard proves it in the bee scene. Dispossession is also symbolized by other animals. Both Richard and Bigger like to contemplate birds by the window, which epitomize the freedom they do not enjoy in their home and lives.

One day when Richard sits cautiously in the house watching through the window, he sees “a bird [which] wheeled past the window and greeted it with a glad shout” (*BB*, 9). An identical scene occurs in *Native Son* where Bigger contemplates a pigeon which is flying “on wings stretched so taut and sheer that [...] [he] could see the gold of the sun through their translucent tips. He tilted his head and watched the slate-colored bird flap and wheel out of sight over the edge of a high roof” (*NS*, 23-24). These two scenes take place when Richard and Bigger feel lonely like strangers in their own families. In fact, the flying birds and the open window symbolize the freedom Richard and Bigger have been deprived of and are yearning for. In *Native Son*, while on the run following his murder of Mary, Bigger finds himself in an empty building. “He tiptoed up to the fourth floor and found two windows, both of them dark. He tries to lift the screen in one of them and found it frozen” (*NS*, 213). In fictional works, as Wayne-Ly interestingly observes, “Geographical space identifies with an overall sign embodying various signs to be deciphered for determining the symbolic codes of representation”<sup>119</sup> (Wayne-Ly, 2008, 246). In this respect, the two windows also stand as symbols of the freedom and the narrow escape Bigger looks for but, unfortunately for him, both windows keep him from opening them, which suggests that his hope for escape is as bleak as the windows are dark and frozen. And indeed, when the police and vigilantes search for him in the building, he crawls up until he reaches the roof, which symbolizes the end of his flight and hopes. “Dizzily he drew back. This was the end. There were no more roofs over which to run and dodge” (*NS*, 213). He remains on the spot, languishing like a dying bird which is no less symbolic in *Uncle Tom’s Children*.

In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Reverend Taylor is kidnapped and severely beaten by a white mob which blames him for not doing anything to prevent his community people from taking to the street to claim for relief food. After being beaten and left groping home,

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<sup>119</sup> « L’espace géographique s’identifie à un signe global comportant divers signes à décrypter pour déterminer les codes de représentation symbolique. »

Taylor watched the brown dusty road winding away in the darkness, like a twisting ribbon. Then he ducked his head, being seared again with fire and feeling a slight rush of air brush across his face. A small bird wheeled past his eyes and fluttered dizzily in the starlight. He watched it veer and dip, then crash softly into a tree limb. It fell to the ground, flapping tiny wings blindly. Then the bird twittered in fright and sailed straight upward into the starlight, vanishing. He walked northward because the bird had darted in that direction. (*UTC*, 165-166)

Here too, the bird is the symbol of Reverend Taylor's lost freedom and authority as he is humiliated by the white mob. The bird's attitudes suggest it is mocking Taylor by imitating his corporal movement while being whipped. Nevertheless, Reverend Taylor walks northward, simply because the bird flies to this direction, which also symbolizes the dispossession of his habitual lucidity and sense of leadership. This episode surely makes Taylor become aware of himself as not different from the rest of his community members who are victims of various forms of dispossession. The day Taylor is severely beaten up, he remains sleepless around the clock.

The clock is another important symbol in Wright's works of art, most specifically in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*. One of the uses of the clock is to warn or remind and this use is recurrent in *Uncle Tom's Children* where the clock is used to signal the presence of dispossession. In "Long Black Song," the sound of the clock is ubiquitous right from the onset of the short story to the occurrence of the dispossession it foreshadows. Just after Sarah gets up early in the morning, her baby starts crying. She tries to tease it into silence in vain until she gives it the clock which it uses to warn against evil thought or presence. The first warning comes out as soon as Sarah doubts her love with Silas and feels attracted by her former lover Tom who left her and went to war. "Lawd, Ah wondah how would it been wid Tom?" (*UTC*, 106). "Bang! Bang! Bang!" the baby rings the clock to warn against evil thought. When a black car arrives at the yard while Silas is still away, the baby rings again, "Bang, Bang, Bang" (*UTC*, 107), to warn its mother of the arrival of potential dispossessors. The white visitor gets out of the car and enters Sarah's house. He takes out a handkerchief and cleans his face and once again the baby rings, "Bang! Bang! Bang" (*UTC*, 107) to warn against the white man's evil intentions. Even though a clock is not expensive, Sarah explains to the white visitor that they have no money to pay for it and that they have no interest in knowing the time. In this regard, the absence of a clock symbolizes poverty and lack of perspective to such an extent that they have lost the notion of time and its meaning in their daily lives. Notwithstanding Sarah's baby ringing the clock to warn her about the evil intentions of the white visitor, Sarah fails to understand. It is not until the last "Bang! Bang! Bang!" comes out that she understands and suspects the white visitor's evil intentions as "she could hear the white man breathing at her side; she felt his eyes

on her face. She looked at him; she saw he was looking at her breast” (*UTC*, 108). This scene can be compared to other clock scenes in *Native Son*.

*Native Son* opens with the noise of a clock. “Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiinnng! An alarm clock sang in the dark and silent room” (*NS*, 15). At first sight, the clinging of the alarm clock does not mean much in the life of Bigger’s family. But as the story unfolds, the reader is made to understand the clock noise as a warning about the upcoming devastating events that will permeate Bigger’s life. In a few words, it can be said that the alarm clock signals the beginning of Bigger’s odyssey that other clock noises will help to fathom out all through his life. After the first clock noise, Bigger goes to the Daltons to take his job interview during which he is asked about his recent past. “Why did they send you to the reform school?” Mr. Dalton asks him. “They said I was stealing! But I wasn’t [...]. I was with some boys and the police picked us up,” he answers. “Mr. Dalton said nothing. Bigger heard a clock ticking somewhere behind him and he had a foolish impulse to look at it” (*NS*, 52). Contrary to *Uncle Tom’s Children* with Sarah, the clock ticking here is not in favor of Bigger. Instead, it warns Mr. Dalton about the risk of hiring a life dispossessor like Bigger. However, “Mr. Dalton said nothing” (*NS*, 52); so Bigger ends up taking his daughter’s life in her own spatial setting.

Nature in Wright’s fiction, particularly in the novels under study here, is usually described as leaguings with the strong to dispossess the weak. Nature is supposed to be the mother of human beings and gracefully offers its resources to any-one who works to enjoy them. Yet in Wright’s fiction, every time the dispossessed subjects find themselves cornered, nature acts against them. What can the weaker subjects do to escape when nature itself associates with the strong to dispossess them? In *Native Son*, water which symbolizes life is ironically used to attack Bigger’s own life so as to compel him to surrender. By the way, water plays an important role in Bigger’s arrest and subsequent death. Johnson also views nature as a symbol of dispossession linked to the white man. The rain and flooding symbolize man’s limits in terms of his capacity to control nature when it rages against man and the example of Lulu, Man’s wife, is a case in point as she needs to deliver but is delayed by heavy rain which becomes an uncontrollable natural force. According to Johnson, the snow symbolizes cold, dire living conditions and, by extension, the white man is associated with this cold (Johnson 293). As the narrative shows, it is the product of nature, namely hot water, which compels Bigger to surrender his life to be dispossessed:

A furious whisper of water, gleaming like silver in the bright lights, streaked above his head with vicious force, passing him high in the air and hitting the roof beyond with a

thudding drone. They had turned on the water hose. The fire department had done that [...]. Then the water hit him, in the side; it was like the blow of a pile driver [...]. He wanted to hold on but could not. His body teetered on the edge; his legs dangled in the air. Then he was falling. He landed on the roof, on his face, in snow dazed. (NS, 214-215)

Indeed, water is used as the final solution to compel Bigger to surrender. More curious is the participation of the fire brigade in the operation. It is normally meant to use water and put uncontrolled fire off but, here, it is Bigger who has become the symbol of fire which is to be put off before he makes more victims in society. The negative role of natural water flows from *Native Son* back through *Uncle Tom's Children* to *Black Boy*. In *Black Boy*, natural water dispossesses Richard of his courage and inflicts him terrible fear, especially when his uncle Hoskins brings him to the riverside for a ride. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, natural water becomes flooding which dispossesses Mann of his farming production (UTC, 55), and keeps him from rowing fast to hospital with his wife in labor (UTC, 60; 64). And when water delays Mann, it leads to an incident where he kills the owner of the boat he has stolen to evacuate his wife to hospital. As though natural water was united with the white soldiers, Mann is severely beaten by the rain before they lynch him for murdering Heartfield (UTC, 91).

Through nature's attitude, Wright intends to show that human relationship is no longer ruled by the law which protects the weak from the strong but by natural law, the jungle law in which the strong crush down the weak without the protection of nature. Whether in *Uncle Tom's Children* or *Native Son*, nature negatively impacts oppressed people's lives by keeping them from reaching their objectives. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, when Big Boy is on the run to escape the white mob, nature does not favor his escape. Rather, it puts a spoke in his wheels:

He slowed to a walk, looking back and ahead. A light wind skipped over the grass. A beetle lit on his cheek and he brushed it off. Behind the dark pines hung a red sun. Two bats flapped against that sun. He shivered, for he was growing cold; the sweat on his body was drying. [...] He looked around again; the landscape was bare. (UTC, 41)

This excerpt mirrors how difficult it is for an oppressed person, running to save his life to fulfill his plans as even nature, which is supposed to be neutral, also stands on his way. In the scene, Big Boy finally succeeds in finding a hole on the hillside to hide, but he has not yet got out of the tricky situation nature puts him in. A big snake crawls out of the hole and threatens him against having shelter in it. But in nature, might is power and Big Boy, to get access to his hideout, is obliged to use his might to kill the snake in a battle that Wright describes so precisely. This precision reveals Big Boy's sense of determination to fight for his natural right to hide in the hole:

Warily, he crept back up the slope, his stick poised. When about seven feet from the snake he stopped and waved the stick. The coil grew tighter, the whirl sounded louder, and the flat head reared to strike. He went to the right, and the flat head followed him, the blue-black tongue darting forth; he went to the left, and the flat head followed him there too. He stopped, teeth clenched. He had this snake. Jus have t kill im! This wuz the safest pit on the hillside. He waved the stick again, looking at the snake before, thinking of a mob behind. The flat head reared higher. With stick over shoulder, he jumped in, swang. The stick sang through the air, catching the snake on the side of the head, sweeping him out of coil. There was a brown writhing mass. Then Big Boy was upon him, pounding blows home, one on top of the other. He fought viciously, his eyes red, his teeth heard in a snarl. He beat till the snake lay still; then stomped it with his heel, grinding its head into the dirt. (*UTC*, 42)

One can see the determination and violence with which Big Boy fights the snake. The narrative further reveals that “the corners of his lips were white with spittle” (*UTC*, 42). The snake stands for nature which associates with the white mob chasing him. By overcoming the snake, it is nature and the white mob that Big Boy overcomes to keep them from dispossessing him of his life; and indeed, the white mob has not been able to catch him since he has been able to dispossess the snake of its hole and hides inside it until the mob searches for him in vain and goes back home. In one word, nature and all its components are portrayed in a way that shows its involvement in depriving the majority of characters of everything, and Bigger in *Native Son* is not an exception to that rule.

Initially, Bigger has no family ties and surrounding. Dispossession affects him personally and socially, outside the family realm, which urges him to struggle to recover his real self. This struggle drags him into the murder of a white girl. It is not until he commits that murder he starts feeling himself as an individual but society moves to counter his individualistic quests. What makes Bigger’s situation dramatic is the intervention of nature in an attempt to stop him from achieving his plans. In the ransom note scene, where Bigger is about to make Bessie drop the ransom note so as to further harm the Whites whom he views as oppressors, he feels the sky and nature are against him and oppress him. The narrative exposes this as follows:

He walked to Dalton’s through the snow. His right hand was in his coat pocket, his fingers about the kidnap note [...]. He felt that the very air and sky would suddenly speak, commanding him to stop. He was sailing fast into the face of a cold wind that all but sucked his breath from him [...]. Around him was silence and night and snow falling, falling as though it had fallen from the beginning of time and would always fall till the end of the world. (*NS*, 156)

The snow, the sky, and the wind all join to attempt keeping Bigger from his wicked plans as he feels them ordering him to stop. But Bigger has already become an individual enjoying his subjectivity to such an extent that he cannot turn back. That is why “he took the letter out of his

pocket and slipped it under the door” before feeling exulted: “I done it! I done it now! (*NS*, 156). When Bigger finishes with the Daltons, he attacks his own girl-friend Bessie as he kills her to keep her from testifying against him. In that scene too, nature tries to dispossess him of this second murder plan. Though nature has not been able to keep Bigger from murdering Bessie, it oppresses him after his murderous act as he feels “a cold chill, colder than the air of the room, close about his shoulders like a shawl whose strands were woven of ice and the night wind moans” (*NS*, 196), surely in complaint. This complaint constantly reminds Bigger of his bad deeds to the point that he is as troubled as Richard is in the optical shop which is also a significant symbol of dispossession.

While looking closely into the optical shop in Memphis, it can be understood that it is the whole microcosm of complex American society Richard finds himself therein. Richard’s work place has become the symbol of dignity dispossession. In this shop, Olin plots against Richard and Harrison in order to make them fight just for white spectacles as it is made clear in this discussion between Olin and Richard:

‘Did you see that Harrison nigger?’ he asked.  
‘No, Sir,’ I lied.  
‘Well, he still has that knife for you,’ he said.  
Hate tightened in me. But I kept a dead face.  
‘Did you buy a knife yet?’ He asked me.  
‘No, Sir,’ I answered.  
‘Do you want to use mine?’ he asked. ‘You’ve got to protect yourself, you know.’  
‘No, I’m not afraid,’ I said.  
‘Nigger, you’re a fool,’ he spluttered. ‘I thought you had some sense! Are you going to just let that nigger cut your heart out? His boss gave him a knife to use against you. Take this knife, nigger, and stop acting crazy!’ (*BB*, 260)

This scene takes place after Richard cannot work anymore in an optical shop as Reynolds thinks it is “a white man’s work” and that he will “never amount to anything” (*BB*, 207). Richard is compelled to leave the shop for a second one, only to discover that oppression and dispossession exist everywhere. In the second optical shop scene, Olin stands for the Southern rich man willing to use black people as animals just for the sake of pleasure. Mr. Crane, who consoles Richard and advises him to be focused on his work instead of paying attention to Olin’s racist attitude, represents the Southerners who are sympathetic with Blacks and yet remain powerless to their situation. Mr. Crane can be likened to Mr. Dalton in *Native Son* who is aware of Blacks’ suffering but remains neglectful in a way that maintains the racial status quo. Shorty represents black workers who hate Whites but hide their racial and personal pride to avoid repercussions. The porter, who always complains about having to work in the same place every day and every

hour, represents the more embittered black workers of the South. Several Ku Klux Klan members and Jews are also present in the optical office. Wright summons the racial dynamics of the region in one physical space in order to show how dispossessing they are and how Richard struggles alone to find some position vis-à-vis the complex situation. Intellectualism is seen by Whites as a threat to their supremacy. That is why Richard's intellectual abilities earn him troubles at the optical shop and even in his family (Hakutani 72). In such circumstances, it becomes difficult for Richard to find a way out. As a result, he ends up leaving this place to pursue his dream of becoming a writer as Bigger ends up killing Mary to recover his subjectivity before being sent to jail to serve his death sentence.

Bigger's prison cell is a place where Wright summons the majority of the protagonists of the crisis so as to reveal the responsibility of each of them. When Reverend Hammond arrives, he invites Bigger to stop resisting and abandon his fate in the hands of God (*NS*, 224). He gives him a cross as a spiritual reference in this respect. Reverend Hammond is the symbol of the church or religion which Bigger rejects altogether as being utopist, which justifies the reason why he throws the cross away (*NS*, 267-268). Bigger's family also comes to the prison cell to pay him a visit. Meanwhile, Mr. and Mrs. Daltons arrive and this arrival is not a haphazard coincidence. Wright makes this meeting take place to show the responsibilities of both families in Bigger's current situation. While Bigger's mother begs Mrs. and Mr. Daltons to do something for her son, Bigger feels completely dispossessed of his pride and feels like chasing his mother out of the cell (*NS*, 236). Jan also comes to the prison cell to pay Bigger a visit and he is the only one who formally recognizes his responsibility in Bigger's situation. He knows that Bigger has been dispossessed by Whites and he, as a white man, is to be blamed for not doing anything to improve his situation. Buckley, the prosecutor and politician who comes to the prison cell, is the symbol of the law which has kept Bigger out of the socio-economic and political system in such a way that he ends up becoming a criminal. Yet, Buckley does not confess his responsibility. His only concern is to send Bigger to the electric chair. Even Max, who is Bigger's lawyer, has some part of responsibility in Bigger's situation. In fact, as a communist, he disregards the specific plight of the black man until Bigger's crime takes place as a motif of his hunger for justice.

The motif of hunger permeates every work of Wright who uses it so astutely and artistically to convey the theme of dispossession. Hunger cannot be perceived only from its literal meaning. While its literal meaning cannot be denied, its symbolic meaning appears to be much more important. There are two types of hunger in Wright's works, namely the physical

and non-physical one. As far as physical hunger is concerned, it should be said that it informs poverty and individualism. When one is hungry, one of the most plausible reasons is the lack of financial means to provide for the necessary food supplies to ensure survival. In “Down by the Riverside,” for instance, Mann’s family live in poor housing conditions and is at risk of being flooded. Their poor housing conditions show that poverty keeps them from ensuring the daily bread for the family as they can be seen “feeling hunger, fatigue, thirst” (*UTC*, 67). The same underprivileged living conditions are experienced by Richard’s family in *Black Boy* where he repetitively complains about being hungry, mostly because his father has abandoned them, which has plunged the whole family into precariousness. Worse, when Richard asks his mother for food, she tells him that his absent father is responsible for their situation and that the only thing they can do now is to wait for God to bring food, a God Richard does not believe in and who unfortunately never shows up with food for them to be satisfied.

‘Mama, I’m hungry,’ I complained one afternoon.  
‘Jump up and catch a kungry,’ she said, trying to make me laugh and forget. [...]  
‘But I’m hungry. I want to eat.’  
‘You’ll have to wait.’  
‘But I want to eat now.’  
‘But there’s nothing to eat,’ she told me. [...]  
‘But I want eat,’ I said, beginning to cry.  
‘You’ll have to wait,’ she said. [...] ‘God to send some food.’ [...]  
‘Where’s your father?’ she asked me. [...]  
As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger, and whenever I felt hungry I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness. (*BB*, 21-22)

As can be understood, Richard’s hunger is linked to his own father who does not shoulder his responsibility as a father. The only alternative left to him is to wait for an invisible being to provide them with food. Nevertheless, Richard does not fall into superstition as his mother does. He rather associates his hunger with his father and hates him to the point of later refusing to go back to him and ask for a penny to buy little food. In this scene, hunger is linked to the lack of financial means or poverty but in other circumstances, hunger simply signals the prevalence of individualism.

Richard lives in a social context wherein everybody has to run for his life or fend for himself, because nobody can count on anybody in terms of food provision. The only solution to get food when one is hungry is to get a job as Ella’s response to Richard makes it clear: “You’ll have to wait until I get a job and buy food” (*BB*, 22). From now on, “Hunger had always been more or less at [Richard’s] elbow when [he] played and [he] began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at [his] bedside, staring at [him] gauntly” (*BB*, 21), which



Thaddeus refers to as “spiritual hunger” (131). In the individualistic society, one can be starving while others eat everything they want without showing any sympathy to the starving person. This reality is mirrored in *Black Boy* through Richard’s testimony:

Toward evening my mother would take the hot dishes into the dining room where the white people were seated, and I would stand as near the dining room door as possible to get a quick glimpse of the white faces gathered around the loathed table, eating [...]. Watching the white people eat would make my empty stomach churn and I would grow vaguely angry. Why could I not eat when I was hungry? Why did I always have to wait until others were through? I could not understand why some people had enough food and others did not. (*BB*, 26)

Richard cannot understand why he cannot have access to food when he is hungry while others can. Even though his mother does not answer his question, just moaning “I don’t know” (*BB*, 22), she is just trying to hide the truth from Richard to certainly protect him. As an adult who has gone through many Jim Crow experiences, she does know that they live in an individualistic society where sympathy and solidarity are not the commonest values. Richard is physically hungry and the fact of not being able to understand the social dynamics which underlie it makes him experience other types of hunger which are non-physical.

Richard’s hunger goes beyond physical hunger to become a non-physical one which also informs his dispossession in society. Nevertheless, his physical hunger has taught him that he needs to take his responsibility right from an early age and fight for self-awareness so as to finally reach self-accomplishment in a way that he can provide himself for his basic needs. One of the ways to reach self-awareness and self-accomplishment is to get access to a good education which becomes his new hunger. But because a good education is inaccessible to poor people like him, he hungers for self-learning or self-teaching to discover the world in which the education provided for people of his kind has been hidden from him. The following excerpt is much more telling about his new hunger:

Reading also cast me down, made me see what was possible, what I had missed [...]. I was overwhelmed. I grew silent, wondering about the life around me [...]. Could I ever learn about life and people? To me, with my vast ignorance [...] it seemed a task impossible of achievement [...]. I had learned to live with hate. But to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond my reach, that more than anything else hurt, wounded me [...]. I felt trapped and occasionally, for a few days, I would stop reading. But a vague hunger would come over me for books, books that opened up new avenues of feeling and seeing [...]. Again I would read and wonder as only the naïve and unlettered can read and wonder. (*BB*, 250-252)

It is clear from Richard’s words that he has reached self-awareness as he knows many things about his own life and that of others which have been hidden from him. Such awareness makes

him hungry for reading and whenever he feels like stopping reading, he thinks about all those things that have been hidden from him and he cannot but carry on. Self-teaching aims at discovering hidden knowledge which can get one out of ignorance to self-awareness and action. Richard's hunger for learning leads him to meet story telling which has become passion for him:

I hungered for the sharp, frightening breath-taking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me, and I vowed that as soon as I was old enough I would buy all the novels there were and read them to feed that thirst for violence that was in me, for intrigue, for plotting, for secrecy, for bloody murders. So profoundly responsive a chord had the tale struck in me that threats of my mother and grand-mother had no effect whatsoever [...]. No words or punishment could have possibly made me doubt. I had tasted what to me was life, and I would have more of it, somehow, someway. (*BB*, 48)

As Richard's testimony reveals, he has starved from knowledge and when he meets it, nobody or nothing can keep him from enjoying it, because it is vital for him in that stories, for example, make his fantasies real and permit him to experience something new as he confesses: "Though they were merely stories, I accepted them as true because I wanted to believe them, because I hungered for a different life, for something new" (*BB*, 142).

Richard's hunger for knowledge does not only aim at discovering himself as an individual in society but also discovering and understanding other people. The discovery of oneself and others permit to perceive the inequalities which exist between oneself and others and attempt to restore solidarity, which is mirrored through *Uncle Tom's Children*. In "Fire and Cloud", hunger symbolizes discrimination as the town authorities refuse to provide relief services for the needy who are made up of Blacks and Whites. In this short story, Blacks and Whites know themselves and each other very much and physical hunger puts them together as one without any regard to skin color to claim for human rights such as food and social justice. While Reverend Taylor is still doubting about his commitment in the march for food, Hadley, a white man among black men, reassures him: "The whats keeping you from working with us?" asked Hadley. "Im a white man and Im here willing to fight for your people rights!" (*UTC*, 144). Beyond physical hunger, Hardley is now hungry for social justice as the rest of his plea next to Reverend Taylor shows:

'That's just it, Reverend,' said Hadley. 'Don't be afraid of their turning you down because youre fighting for your people. If they knew youd really fight, theyd dislike you; yes? But you can make them give you something to all your people, not just to you. Don't you see, Taylor, youre standing between your people and the white folks. You can make them give something to all of them. And the poor, hungry white folks will be with you.' (*UTC*, 144)

It can be grasped from Hardley's plea that he is not personally concerned with physical hunger as he uses the personal pronoun "you" while talking about the hungry people. Yet he, as a white man, tries to convince Reverend Taylor as a black man to participate in the march for food. It can be said that Hardley's hunger is all about social justice because he realizes that one category of people starves while another one lives in the midst of plenty. It is the same hunger that pushes Max, as a white lawyer, to defend Bigger with all his soul in the tribunal in *Native Son*. In a few words, whether physical or non-physical, hunger unites Blacks and Whites, which means that human beings need to go beyond the mere matter of race, notwithstanding the burning fire of violence.

Fire in *Black Boy* is the first symbol which "both establishes his familial relationships and foreshadows the violence, alienation and ambivalence that marked [Richard's] future experience" (Wilhite 107). Fire is used for positive things such as heating the house to chase out cold. Because of idleness and lack of self-expression, Richard transforms the fire in the house into a dangerous phenomenon by playing with it. He lives in a house where his identity as an individual is dispossessed and the burning fire in the house stands for his individual identity being burnt in his own family. Thus, he uses this fire against his family by turning it into a difficultly controllable event:

The room hold nothing of interest except the fire and finally I stood before the shimmering embers, fascinated by the quivering coal [...]. Why not throw something into the fire and watch it burn? I pulled the broom and tore out a batch of straws and tossed them into the fire and watched them smoke, turn black, blaze, and finally become white wisps of ghosts that vanished [...]. I pulled several straws from the broom and held them to the fire until they blazed; I rushed to the window and brought the flame in touch with the hems of the curtains. (*BB*, 9-10)

Burning the broom is a significant act for Richard as it can be interpreted as destroying womanhood. Burning the broom is a way for him to dispossess women, who keep the house clean, of their power. The burning of the family house, the place of intimacy and warmth, is also the expression of the dispossession of tenderness. Burning causes the same effect as dispossession, that is, the loss of something dear. The fire makes colors disappear and turns the black straw into white. As the excerpt shows, the fire blazes and turns the straws from black to white wisps of ghosts, which suggests black identity being forced into whiteness. In other words, fire can also be interpreted here as a metaphor of the dispossession of Blacks whose identity is being colonized by whiteness, making of them hybrid, mixed individuals, both influenced by black culture and the white one. André Kaboré notices in his interpretation of fire in Thiobianyi's *Before the Fires I was Black*:

We move thus from the metaphoric fire that can reduce trees of culture and knowledge into ashes, to a new fire that can bring about a post-colonial hybrid identity, white and black at the same time [...]. The metaphoric fire is able to erase one's identity in the same way dust covers one's body. The fire is also not a black smoke producing or darkening fire but a whitening one. (Kaboré 245)

Indeed, in the scene where Richard sets the whole house on fire, not only can this fire darken black identity or simply turn it into a white one just as the straws have been burnt into white wisps. It is surely after becoming aware of the harmful capacity of such a fire that Richard "trembled with fright and crawled under the house" (*BB*, 11). But how can one recover his genuine identity in such circumstances? For Kaboré, "a good shake off can reveal one's real black identity that is hidden under a white mask" (245), which can be put on a par with Frantz Fanon's interpretation. According to Fanon, this mask is characterized by the steadfast willingness of Blacks to look like Whites. In Fanon's words, "the black man is a black man, [and] thanks to a series of affective aberrations, settled in a universe of which he should be taken out" <sup>120</sup> (Fanon, 1952, 6). In fact, the universe Fanon refers to is the white world and all its values that Blacks mimic. Because they want to become white in spite of their black skin, Blacks become prisoners of themselves and, as Fanon states, "tend to nothing else but free the colored man from himself" <sup>121</sup> (6). Therefore, in order to become free, Blacks should shake off their white masks and be proud of their own identity, which is the only way they can gain respect from their white counterparts. Indeed, Richard tries in *Black Boy* to shake off any imposed identity from him but his own family stands in his way keeping him from reaching his objective. While fire symbolizes identity dispossession in *Black Boy*, its significance in *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom's Children* can be nuanced.

The most dangerous things which fire symbolizes are human anger and physical pain. When fire burns and is out of control, one can see the metaphoric anger with which the flames rage out and one is at the same time aware of the physical suffering or pain that such a fire can provoke for anyone who comes into contact with it. Wright lets the reader imagine the pain of fire before comparing it to the suffering of the oppressed characters as is the case in *Uncle Tom's Children* where fire is used to describe Reverend Taylor's suffering during his extra-legal beating: "The whip brought fire and he could not stand it any longer; his heart seemed about to burst. He screamed, stretched his knees out and twisted his arms till he lay sideways,

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<sup>120</sup> « Le Noir est un homme noir ; c'est à dire qu'à la faveur d'une série d'aberrations affectives, il s'est établi au sein d'un univers d'où il faudra bien le sortir. »

<sup>121</sup> « Nous ne tendons à rien de moins qu'à libérer l'homme de couloir lui-même. »

half on his stomach [...]. The fire flamed over all his body; he stiffened, glaring upward, wild-eyed" (*UTC*, 164). Wright describes Reverend Taylor's suffering by the motif of fire to penetrate the reader's mind and make him feel what Taylor feels in order to understand the extent to which he suffers from the rage and hate of the white mob. Such rage and hate are also perceived in Bigger's burning of Mary in *Native Son*. After killing Mary and stuffing her corpse into the furnace, Bigger wants to keep the fire hotter, which is a symbol of his willing to prolong the burning of the white body that Mary represents in his mind (*NS*, 106). The raging fire in the furnace also symbolizes Bigger's rage against the likes of his boss who has made of him a second-class citizen. For sure, even though Bigger has not used fire to kill Mary, it sometimes participates in or signals the dispossession of human life. After killing Mary, "fire sang in Bigger's ears" (*NS*, 134) to foreshadow his future death. Dispossession has become so prevalent in Wright's fictional world that it leads some characters into psychological instability and compels others to adjust to it to escape death.

## CHAPTER V: INSTABILITY AND ADAPTATION: THE IMPACT OF DISPOSSESSION

When dispossession takes place in the characters' lives, it leaves them in serious and painful conditions. Some of the shortcomings of dispossession are psychological and they include stigmas which are manifested in various forms and impinge on the welfare of those who are deprived of everything. The current chapter will firstly look into the inner impact of dispossession by laying emphasis on the various forms of instability suffered by Wright's characters. Because of psychological instability, the characters are made to encounter social and cultural disorientation which leads them to socio-cultural instability, as I will analyze. Intertwined with dispossession, socio-cultural instability is punctuated with tensions stemming from stereotypes. The characters are thus urged into adopting adjustment that goes through assimilation to come to terms with the daily stereotypes and destabilizing situations they have to tolerate. That is why the last stage of this chapter will consist in analyzing the ways adopted by the characters who are forced into adaptation and assimilation to avoid being bothered by the dominant group and to get around dispossession of any sorts.

### 1. Psychological Instability

In the collective imagination of Wright's fictional universe, fear remains a fundamental element in the lives of his characters. We can list the fear of white women and white men, the fear of intra and interracial violence, and the fear of law. All these fears contribute to the psychological destabilization of the characters.

Since they are victims of sexual dispossession which prohibits them from any emotional or sexual contact with women from the white ruling class, white women symbolize fear in the collective imagination of the black community. For black males, having a love affair with a white woman, who is the symbol of white power, causes dramatic consequences which can lead to death. By dint of fear of white women who often stand for the dual subject of desire and death, this fear leads some of Wright's characters to cross the red line, especially the men who have nothing and think they have nothing to lose. When a man of the lower class violates the taboo established between him and the ruling class, desire often turns into murder. That's exactly where Bigger finds himself in *Native Son*. When Mary's drunken body ends up in Bigger's hands, who lugs her to her bedroom, her youthful beauty arouses his desire which

turns into murder following the presence of Mary's mother. But why, despite Mrs. Dalton's blindness, does Bigger go beyond the point of no return by suffocating Mary to death for fear of being seen? David Britt's comment clearly answers this question:

It is Bigger's fear that he, a Negro man, is about to be caught in Mary's room that precipitates her death. Mrs Dalton's appearance at the door, his frantic attempt to silence Mary, her suffocation and death—all follow rapidly, activated by his guilt and fear. Bigger's subsequent actions result from his psycho-sexual fear and hatred [...] and Wright make[sic!] clear that white prejudice has instilled into Bigger the rational fear which resulted in the Dalton tragedy. (Britt 4)

As Britt makes it clear, it is Bigger's fear of what white women stand for which leads him into killing Mary even though he knows Mrs. Dalton is blind and could have never discovered his presence in Mary's room. Blindness is meaningless for Bigger. The mere presence of a white woman, be she blind, is sufficient to trigger out his fear. One could consider Bigger's fear of white women understandable, because he was in the act of having sexual contact with a white girl.

However, in other contexts, black males do not need to be in direct contact with white women to arouse fear. At the mere sight of a white woman in a secluded place, fear arises either in black men or in white women who fear the myth of the black sex machinery. And this simple fear of Blacks' masculinity is enough to unleash murderous madness against them. Aware of this taboo, which prohibits any physical contact between a black man and a white woman standing as a pure and untouchable goddess, black families integrate this situation into their children's education, especially those of the male sex so as to keep them falling into a fatal mishap. This reality is also emphasized by Eugene McCarthy in his analysis of "Big Boy Leaves Home":

The boys confront the major realities of their lives: the archetypical virginal, untouchable white woman [...]. She is idealized as a transsexual goddess. The white male and female archetypes are incarnate symbols of fear which the boys have been instructed by their families to accept as the historical reality of the white world. The four emerge from a timeless world they should enjoy as boys into tragic social/sexual history of white-black relations. (McCarthy 731-732)

McCarthy allows us to understand how the white woman is idealized and taught as the symbol of white power and pride. This fear is part of family education, just as the fear of the black man is part of the education of white girls and women.

The lives of black characters are punctuated by the fear of coming across a white man because of the violence they risk. This fear is external as well as internal. Its internal presence becomes a feeling of being controlled by Whites as is the case with some characters like Bigger

in *Native Son* who fears Whites working in him. “You know where the white folks live?” Bigger asks Gus before providing the answer: “Right down here in my stomach [...]. Every time I think of ‘em, I feel’ em [...] that’s when I think something awful’s going to happen” (*NS*, 24). Internal fear is also expressed in Bigger’s life in the scene where he and his comrades decide to rob the shop of a white man named Blum. As a gang leader, Bigger is yet afraid of the white man and adopts a strategy of violence to hide his own fear in order to prevent the robbery from taking place. “In a split of second, he felt how his fist and arm and body would feel if he hit Gus squarely in the mouth, drawing blood; Gus would fall and he would walk out and the whole thing would be over and the robbery would not take place” (*NS*, 34). When Gus discovers Bigger’s fear, a fight breaks out between them because one is aware of the fear of the other but hides his own fear to make the other believe that he is brave enough to venture out and engage in such a risky act as robbing a white man’s store:

But I’ll be goddamn if I’m taking orders from you, Bigger! You are just a scared coward! You calling me scared so nobody’ ill see how scared you is! Bigger leaped at him but Jack ran between them [...]. Bigger’s stomach burned and a hazy black cloud hovered a moment before his eyes, and left. Mixed images of violence ran like sand through his mind, dry and fast, vanishing. He could stab Gus with his knife; he could slap him; he could trip him up and send him sprawling on his face. (*NS*, 27)

From this excerpt, it is understood that Gus is braver than Bigger in trying to make him accept his own fear in order to overcome it so that the robbery could take place. But Gus’s attempt sounds like an opportunity for Bigger to fight in order to delay the robbing as long as possible, if not cancel it. For the second time, when Gus reaffirms Bigger’s own fear of robbing Blum, he gets angry, jumps up and punches him, always with a tacit view to keep their burglary from taking place:

‘Lick it,’ Bigger said, his body tingling with elation. Gus’s eyes filled with tears. ‘Lick it,’ I said. You think I am playing? Gus looked round the room without moving his head, just rolling his eyes in a mute appeal for help. But no one moved. Bigger’s left fist was slowly lifting to strike. Gus’s lips moved toward the knife; he struck out his tongue and touched the blade. Gus’s lips quivered and tears stream down his cheeks. (*NS*, 43)

Bigger’s meek and mild way of life among the Daltons betrays the apparent courage he displays in the presence of his comrades in the street. Bigger expresses all his masculinity among his gang members whereas he perfectly plays the scared little boy’s role in the Daltons family. Actually, fear is part of Bigger’s life and it is the fear of whiteness which keeps him from being comfortable in the Daltons family, with Mary and Jan, with Max, and with Blum. For instance, Bigger is so overwhelmed by the fear of white people that when the blind woman, Mrs. Dalton, finds him in Mary’s room, he sees her not as a human being but rather as a ghost



which symbolizes fear: “He saw coming slowly toward him a tall, thin white woman, walking silently, her hands lifted delicately in the air and touching the wall to either side of her [...]. His face and hair were completely white; she seemed to him like a ghost” (*NS*, 52). Bigger’s fear conveys that of dispossessed people at large which can be analyzed as a general and structural pattern recognizable to any “Negro.” “Negroes’ problems have been juxtaposed into one ball of problem, consisting in fear whose abode is the mind. The structural fear Negroes are faced with emanates from their thoughts after being instilled in them by their white counterparts” (Onunkwo *et al.*111), which Richard confirms in *Black Boy* since he mentions Whites as “monstrous faces” which arouses in him “an over reaching symbol of fear” (*BB*, 39). More importantly, Patricia Tuitt comprehensively fathoms out the role of fear as a result of dispossession in *Native Son*:

*Fear takes concrete shape in the death of Mary Dalton, the daughter of Bigger’s ‘liberal’ white employer, at the hands of Bigger, but it is the fear of entering and thereby challenging the white world that is the primary source of the ‘fear’ explored in Part One. As the narrative unfolds, it is made clear that it is also this ‘fear’ which sets the conditions for the killing. Fear keeps Bigger from committing his first ‘real’ crime when he aborts the plan to rob Blum, a store owned by a white man. A ‘real’ crime, not because Bigger and his friends are innocent of crime, but because as Bigger asserts ‘crime for a (negro) was only when he harmed whites, took white lives or (injured) white property.’ It is the fear of being found transgressing white ‘space’ that incites the killing of Mary Dalton, and all the time ‘his eyes were filled with the white blur moving toward him.’ This is the fear that at one point in the novel is explicitly named ‘law’, ‘that driving desire to escape the law, [...] a sense of the white blur coming near.’ The fear that engulfs Bigger until he attains partial release through the killing of Mary Dalton. (Tuitt 208)*

Despite this situation described by Tuitt, the dispossessed person cannot react because he is “a Negro boy who was the product of a dislocated society, [...] a dispossessed and disinherited man, leaving amid the greatest possible plenty on earth, looking and feeling for a way out” (*Walden* 37).

Fear can have dire consequences for those who are constantly oppressed. In such situations where their lives are threatened, they can choose flight to escape it. However, fear sometimes happens to become so intense that it cuts off the fugitives’ legs. In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Mann goes through the same experience. Indeed, Mann is stuck with his pregnant wife in his cabin during a torrential rain which has flooded the city. With no financial means to pay for a boat to bring his wife to hospital, his son Jim steals a boat owned by Heartfield. Mann is aware of the emergency of his situation, but his fear of boarding a stolen white boat will result in the loss of his wife. By dint of procrastinating, Mann arrives too late at the hospital and his wife dies on the delivery table. Fear therefore makes his first victim in Mann’s family and

makes him feel guilty as the narrative shows: “Well in a way all this was his own fault. He had had a chance to get away and he had acted like a fool and had not taken it” (*UTC*, 68). The same fear, as in psychological determinism, also provokes Mann’s own death. Indeed, while he has the opportunity to escape and avoid being arrested for killing Heartfield, his fear takes possession of him and prevents him from doing so. When he can finally summon enough courage to escape, it is too late as he is shot down by the white soldier: “His fear subsided into a cold numbness [...]. He ran among the trees, over the wet ground, listening as he ran for the crack of rifles. Then came a shot” (*UTC*, 102).

The fear of white violence leads oppressed people to display fearful personalities when they enter their oppressors’ territories. In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, after suffering white violence, Reverend Taylor goes from a charismatic and serene minister to a shy and languishing man in the grip of fear as he walks through a white neighborhood. Courage makes it possible to drive out fear or at least to face it and overcome it. However, extreme violence can deprive man of his courage as he can feel unjustified threat in his environment. In Taylor’s case, his fear of Whites remains justified because he had a narrow escape from death as a result of extreme violence from white men. After being severely beaten and released, all of Taylor’s behavior from his place of torture to his home reflects just how afraid of the white neighborhood he has become, and by extension of the white community as a whole:

He [Reverend Taylor] walked northward [...]. He saw houses, white, serene and cool in the night. ‘Spose Ah go to Houston? Naw, hes white. *White!* [...]. Even tho he preaches the gospel Ah preaches, he might not take me in [...].’ He passed a small *white* graveyard surrounded by a high iron picket fence. A *white* graveyard, he thought and snickered bitterly [...]. The fire rage so he had a wild impulse to run, feeling that he would have no time then to suffer. Far down the shadow-dappled pavement he heard the sound of feet. He walked past a white man, then he listened to the white man’s footsteps dying away behind him. He stopped at a corner and held onto a telephone pole [...]. He would be stopped and questioned in town surely. And jailed maybe. Three blocks later on a white boy came up on him so softly and suddenly that he started in panic. After the boy had gone he turned to look, he saw the boy turning, looking at him. He walked on hurriedly [...]. Like a pillar of fire he went through the white neighborhood. (*UTC*, 166-167)

As can be noticed, Taylor has become so terrified that he is even afraid of a gentle and harmless white boy. His anxiety occurs because everything that is white is, in his subconscious, associated with violence. Despite being an adult, Taylor’s fear draws him back to a state of “birthday trauma” as conceptualized by Otto Rank. From a Rankian perspective, “birthday

trauma refers to the feeling of physiological anxiety which occurs after birth”<sup>122</sup> (Mvé Bekale 30). Mvé Bekale explains it further, suggesting:

Typical cases of birthday trauma appear in the state of anxiety the child experiences when he is left alone in a dark room. This situation reminds the child, who is still in the feeling of primitive trauma, of its intra-uterine situation. It realizes the uterus has been symbolically replaced by the dark room<sup>123</sup>. (30-31)

In Taylor’s case, the Black Belt area represents the mother’s uterus and once he is taken out of it, tortured and left alone in the white dark neighborhood which represents the dark room, he experiences birthday trauma because “the situation [he] is faced with evokes what Rank sees as a return to the mother’s body”<sup>124</sup> (31). All this links the white neighborhood with “the fear of death” (31).

If the fear of Whites leads to disastrous situations such as murder or assassination, it is nonetheless true that fear of Blacks does exist among some dispossessed people. In other words, it is not only the privileged and the Whites who scare the dispossessed. Intra-racial violence also remains a source of fear within the black community, as is self-evident in Richard’s case in *Black Boy*. His mother sends him to the market to pay for vegetables and he gets beaten up and has his money robbed by a gang. Despite the fear that these bandits instill in Richard, his mother sends him again to face street violence. This episode is just one of many others experienced by Richard in his childhood. It will be remembered that when he was still younger, he was forced in the middle of the night to go and bury the cat he killed in the garden. The consequences of this fear had a significant impact on Richard’s psychological stability:

But my mother, being more imaginative, retaliated with an assault upon my sensibilities that crushed me with the moral horror involved in taking a life. All that afternoon she directed toward me calculated words that spawned in my mind a horde of invisible demons bent upon exacting vengeance for what I had done [...]. She ordered me to go out into the dark, dig a grave, and bury the kitten [...]. My mind was frozen with horror. I pictured myself gasping for breath and dying in my sleep. I broke away from my mother and ran into the night, crying, shaking with dread. (*BB*, 20-21)

In order to exist, the individual must dominate his environment by asserting his personality as an actor of himself under psychic positions that engage life drive as opposed to death drive (Bouregba, Lebret, 2008). But when the individual feels he is losing control over

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<sup>122</sup> « Le traumatisme de la naissance renvoie à la sensation d’angoisse physiologique qui accompagne la naissance. »

<sup>123</sup> « Les cas typiques du traumatisme de la naissance apparaissent dans l’état d’angoisse qu’éprouve un enfant lorsqu’il est encore sous l’impression du traumatisme primitif, sa situation intra-utérine. Il se rend compte que l’utérus est remplacé symboliquement par la pièce obscure. »

<sup>124</sup> « La situation à laquelle [il] fait face évoque ce que Rank voit comme un retour dans le corps maternel. »

his environment, or when he senses imminent death, an extreme feeling of fear sets in. An individual confronted with the possibility of death is afraid of death and this fear causes powerlessness and leads to consider stopping efforts to stay alive (Bouregba, Lebret, 2008), an intrinsic reality that is found in Bigger in the last moments of his life as the story shows:

He [Bigger] did not eat now [...]. And he did not sleep; at intervals he closed his eyes for a while, no matter the hour, then opened them at some later time to resume his brooding [...]. The Negro preacher who had given him the cross had come and he had driven him away. A white priest had tried to persuade him to pray and he had thrown a cup of hot coffee into his face. (NS, 319)

Stuck in his frightening thoughts and self-awareness, the individual who is in death row reduces his contact with his surrounding human environment, which puts him in a form of isolation and indifference to self in a way that profoundly alters his relationship with his caretakers (Bouregba, Lebret, 2008). Bouregba and Lebret's comment is true to Bigger because when he finds himself in death row, his relationship with his family significantly deteriorates. Following Bigger's mother begging Mr. Dalton for forgiveness, his "shame for his mother amounted to hate. He stood with clenched fists, his eyes burning. He felt that in another moment he would have leaped at her [...]. He told them to stay home, not to come again, to forget him" (NS, 237, 239).

The daily fear in which black Wrightean characters end up leads them into what one might call psychological unrest. The various forms of dispossession, which can be paralleled with Fanon's internal colonization, plunge these individuals into daily questions about their lives, and all of them have a psychological impact. Part of this instability resides in a kind of duality which manifests itself in the fact that, while those who are subjected to dispossession hate their dispossessors, they are envious of their possessions and of what constitutes the dominant world protected from the pangs of socio-economic poverty. In this vein, Fanon's remark permits to unravel the attitudes of native sons such as Bigger and Gus:

The settler's world is a hostile world, which spurns the native but at the same time it is a world of which he is envious. We have seen that the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler, not of becoming the settler but substituting himself for the settler. This hostile world, ponderous and aggressive because it fends off the colonized masses with all the harshness it is capable of representing not merely a hell from which the swiftest flight possible is desirable, but also a paradise close at hand which is guarded by terrible watchdogs. (Fanon 52-53)

Bigger and Gus are psychologically unstable as they do not benefit from proper family care. Bigger's mother does not particularly provide him with motherly love and his father is not mentioned in the novel. Bigger is shown the beautiful images of life, yet he is kept out of them,

which fragments him psychologically between the rational and the emotional (Brivic 233). As a result, Bigger is psychologically destabilized and finally finds psychological rest and escape in the street where he and his friend Gus can dream of reversing prevalent socio-economic and political roles to become the dominant group (Ellis 194). Yet their dreams do not come true and they fall back into the constant psychological instability that dispossession (of all sorts) has ushered them into.

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, almost all the characters are victims of psychological unrest as a direct or indirect result of dispossession. For instance, following his troubles with the Heartfields and the white soldiers, compounded with his wife Lulu's death, Mann tries to remember the past but nothing comes to his mind. He has become a victim of the Ricœurian forgetfulness which contributes to efface his memory and, so to speak, his personal past experience. To some extent, Mann's subconscious selectively denies the past, which enables him to avoid being its prisoner and to suffer less but as Cyrulnik contends, this attitude hinders his psychological resilience:

The wound leaves a hypersensitive trace in the intimate story we tell ourselves. This selective attention can make of us a prisoner of the past. Thus, to defend ourselves, we often react by selective inattention which accounts for denial. So, we suffer less, but we prevent the process of resilience from taking place<sup>125</sup>. (Cyrulnik, 2012, 15)

One can see Mann's loss of psychological resilience after killing Heartfield. This is perceived as the fear of being lynched puts him in a remote position from other individuals surrounding him, to such an extent that he cannot hear some of them crying (*UTC*, 69). Worst of Mann's psychological unrest comes from his soliloquizing on the levee (*UTC*, 79) when he sees horrible images (*UTC*, 80) just as Richard does in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow."

Mann's psychological suffering can be put on a par with Richard's. In fact, Richard as a boy is denied another place after he has learned that a boy previously died in the same bed he lies on every day. Consistent with Wright's characters' fear of death, Richard becomes psychologically troubled as he sees monstrous white faces during bedtime (*BB*, 5). While Richard is in Jackson with Uncle Clark and his wife Aunt Jody, Mr. Burden, a former occupant of their house, pays them a visit and lets Richard know that his boy died on the bed where he sleeps. Consequently, Richard becomes psychologically troubled and has nightmares (*BB*, 105-106). This scene hints at Wright's intention to highlight Blacks' own bitter past experience; it

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<sup>125</sup> « La blessure laisse une trace hypersensible dans l'histoire intime qu'on se raconte. Cette attention sélective peut nous rendre prisonnier du passé. Alors, pour nous défendre, nous réagissons parfois par inattention sélective qui explique le déni. Ainsi, nous souffrons moins, mais nous empêchons le processus de résilience. »

also stands as the immortalization of the past generation's memory so that it can serve as a lesson for future generations. Later when Richard becomes older enough to get a job, he is once again the victim of psychological trauma following Pease and Morrie's plotting who accuse him of calling Pease without adding "Sir" (*BB*, 7-8). Yet Pease and Morrie's plot is simply motivated by their own stereotypes or stigmatization of Richard as a worthless black boy.

The legitimation of the dispossession of racialized poor people inexorably leads to their stigmatization as they are viewed as marginal and deserving little or no attention from the dominant group. In light of Croizet and Leyens's work,

The notion of stigma comes from the Greeks who considered any visible body mark was the visible sign of the inhuman trait of its bearer (slave, criminal, traitor; etc.). Social psychologists define stigma as a feature linked to negative traits and stereotypes which will result in a loss of status and attribution to a discriminated group ("Blacks, "obese people," "homosexuals," etc). One of the features of these stigmas is that, most often, they cannot be hidden from the gaze of people. Thus, discrimination cannot be avoided, which will drag along a number of detrimental consequences for the person who will be affected by it<sup>126</sup>. (Croizet, Leyens 19)

These stigmas which are stuck on the discriminated people drag along a loss of self-esteem and negatively impact on their very physical and psychic stability (Crocker, Major, 1989). Talking about the threat of stereotypes, it should be pointed out that it is basically approached from the perspective of the victims. The latter do not necessarily need anyone to remind them of the threat of stereotypes since they are already aware of them as being linked to their social group. The victims are well aware that others view them as primarily racialized to such an extent that they adjust their daily behaviors accordingly, as is the case with Reverend Taylor in *Uncle Tom's Children* where he avoids running in a white neighborhood for fear of stereotypes. While Taylor walks in the white neighborhood, "the fire raged so he had a wild impulse to run, feeling that he would have no time then to suffer. But he could not run in a white neighborhood. To run would mean to be shot, for a burglar, or anything" (*UTC*, 166). In the same way, and even though he later adjusts to his situation as a stigmatized person, Richard deplures in *Black Boy* the adjustment of the stigmatized people to their stereotypical roles: "I began to marvel at how smoothly the black boys acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them" (*BB*,

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<sup>126</sup> « La notion de stigmatisme nous vient des Grecs, qui considéraient que toute marque corporelle visible était le signe visible du caractère inhumain de son porteur (esclave, criminel, traître, etc.). Les psychologues sociaux définissent le stigmatisme comme une caractéristique associée à des traits et stéréotypes négatifs qui auront pour effet une perte de statut et l'attribution à un groupe discriminé (« noirs », « obèses », « homosexuels », etc.). Une caractéristique de ces stigmates est que, le plus souvent, ils ne peuvent être cachés aux yeux des autres. Ainsi, la discrimination ne peut pas être évitée, ce qui aura nombre de conséquences fâcheuses pour la personne qui en sera la victime. »

116). Richard's reluctance at adjusting to stereotypes compels him to keep on moving from one place to another. His constant movements and multi-faceted experience make his character fragmented into many pieces throughout time and space in a way that the reader cannot understand his whole dispossessed life unless he pieces these fragments together and puts them side by side for an eclectic analysis. Such an analysis could permit, for example, to understand how he apparently embodies dichotomous personality traits like self-esteem and self-denial, self-defense and self-effacement.

Once the self-esteem of dispossessed people is lost, there comes self-denial or self-effacement in favor of a desire to identify with the values of the dominant group which are promoted as the only ones capable of giving man his humanity. For instance, one study by Clark and Clark (1947) on the preferences of Black American children revealed that around three fourths of them prefer white-skinned dolls to black-skinned ones. Their study is still used nowadays<sup>127</sup>. It can, thus, be said that Black American children, and even adults, suffer from a complex of inferiority which is manifested in sub-conscious ways that are the result of a long-standing process of conditioning from the family unit from childhood to adulthood just as Richard contends in *Black Boy*:

Most of them [the dispossessed] were not conscious of living a special, separate, stunted way of life. Yet I knew that in some period of growing up, a period that they had no doubt forgotten, there had been developed in them a delicate, sensitive controlling mechanism that shut off their minds and emotions from all that the white race had said was taboo. (*BB*, 216)

As can be figured out, black people are victims of stigmatization which attributes them a devalued psychological identity even though self-esteem remains one of the basic needs for the individual to smoothly grow up with dignity. Sometimes, tired of the pangs inflicted by dispossession, the characters of the novels end up adopting assimilationist attitudes in order to adjust to dispossession so as to escape violence.

Mental disorders can be perceived as deviance, marginality, and resort to actions "which are norms established by the majority of society. Thus appears a break with the foundations of society that aims at social order" (Dorvil 49). These acts of deviance are first noticed within the

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<sup>127</sup> The "Doll Test" was a psychological experiment designed in the 1940s in the USA to assess the degree of marginalization felt by African American children caused by prejudice, discrimination and racial segregation. Clark and Clark's study is still topical nowadays. A recent experiment has recreated the same test on Italian children and uploaded on You Tube. This experiment shows the extent to which racism has a negative impact on black children faced with white dolls. In this video, the black children prefer the white doll because the black doll is all black, which corroborates Einstein's assertion that "it is easier to break an atom than a prejudice" (Einstein in You Tube.com). The video is still available online. So, for more details on the experiment, follow this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRZPw-9sJtQ>

family before they manifest themselves in society through the street and before causing tension between normal people and those called “abnormal”. These tensions clearly imply that there are norms and values in all societies or communities. The act deriving from mental disorder is, therefore, an act that transgresses the norm accepted by society or its cultural construction (Corine *et al.* 1989).

Mental disorder is a symbol which permeates Wright’s three works. The living conditions of the characters are appalling and this leaves indelible marks on their mental structure (Becker 1987). How can they endure all the injustices and deprivations they are victims thereof without suffering from any mental consequences? In reality, it appears quite simply impossible for people to resist the waves of dispossession without finally being mentally affected. Moreover, in such conditions, they generally have no one to confide in or public places to evacuate the mental weight of dispossession. In the three works, all the protagonists have mental problems which are manifested through violent actions or post-traumatic stress. In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, more precisely in the short story titled “Long Black Song,” the symbol of mental problems experienced by the dispossessed people is manifested by anger and acts beyond the control of temperament or self-possession. And the description of Sarah’s mental state gives us a glimpse at the impact of dispossession on her. Indeed, when she suffers the wrath of her husband Silas following the graphophone scene, she loses her mental balance and appears to be daydreaming:

She circled the house widely, climbing a slope, groping her way, holding the baby high in her arms. After a while she stopped and wondered where on the slope she was. She remembered there was an elm tree near the edge; if she could find it she would know [...]. Dimly she saw in her mind a picture of men killing and being killed. White men killed black men and black men killed white men. (*UTC*, 120)

Even though Sarah tries to regroup her mental faculties and calmly explains to her husband Silas that she did not have sex with the young white man, Silas fails to keep her mental clarity. He thinks only of ways and means to harm this white boy whom he accuses of having violated his marital life by having a love affair with his wife under his marital roof under the pretense of having come to sell him a graphophone at an affordable price. Harming the white boy is part of mental disorders because it is contrary to social norms but the white boy has also posed an act which can be read as mentally abnormal, because he goes beyond his selling and attempts to force Sarah into having sex with him under her marital roof. Despite having suffered the shock of the white boy’s violation of her home, she remains calmer and more mentally lucid



than Silas. In fact, when Sarah tries to calm him down, his response is immediate as he acts as if he lost all his mental faculties:

If yuh wans t eat at mah table yuhs gonna keep them white trash bastards out, yuh hear? Ta white ape kin come n git tha damn box n Ah ain gonna pay im a cent! He had no bisness leavin it here, n yuh had no bisness letting im! Ahma tell tha sonofabich something when he comes out here in the mawnin, so hep me Gawd! Now git back in tha bed! (*UTC*, 118)

As can be seen, Silas does not take enough time to listen to her wife before responding. He does not want to hear anything about Whites, let alone having any business affair with them. At the moment, as this excerpt above shows, Silas still seems to be losing his mental faculties and shows his contempt of Whites. Despite Sarah listening intently to him without reacting, Silas's mental state crumbles. A few minutes later, his mental situation completely collapses as the rest of his action proves:

She heard him walk across the floor in his bare feet. [...] The shucks rustled from Silas' weight as he sat on the edge of the bed. She heard him sigh. Then she jumped because he jumped. She could feel the tenseness of his body; she knew he was sitting bolt upright. She felt his hands fumbling jerkily under the quilt. Then the bed heaved amid a wild shout of shucks and Silas' feet hit the floor with a loud boom [...]. Silas was moving about, cursing under his breath. (*UTC*, 118-119)

Silas's mental state is seriously damaged as this excerpt reveals. He has become unstable throughout the night and wanders in search of Sarah to settle scores with her. Silas's mental disorder later leads him to cross the Rubicon as he beats the white boy before shooting him dead: "Silas's right arm went up; the whip flashed. The white man turned, bending, flinging his hands to shield his head. Silas was going for his gun [...]. She heard a shot ring out. Silas! One of the white men was on the ground [...]. Then [...] he caught one of the man's legs and dragged the body into the middle of the road" (*UTC*, 123). He is next to mental collapse before being burnt alive in his own house by the white mob as a vengeance of the white man he shot dead. Dispossession and destitution, therefore, have led Silas to murder Whites and be himself killed by Whites, and the same story repeats itself in *Native Son*.

*Native Son* perfectly illustrates the symbolism of the mental disorder experienced by the deprived characters. By committing the murder of Mary, Bigger thinks he can finally regain his mental wholeness. He initially feels perked up by his act and now feels more complete, because having achieved something that he has never done before, something that will be talked about all over the neighborhood and in the media, something that will bring him out from invisibility to visibility (Scotland 4). However, this attitude is contrary to the principles of the surrounding

culture which deems it abnormal with regard to the dominant norms, and will cause stigmatization and repression of the dominant culture against Bigger. In a nutshell, Bigger's act is seen as mentally abnormal because it is simply a break with mainstream culture as Dorvil explains:

It is a break with culture, a decline in the homeostatic capacity of the dominant culture. It is a disease diffraction from the surrounding culture. Ultimately, it is not so much how a man acts that constitutes the social problem, but how the majority judges him against prevailing norms. Breaking a rule challenges the dominant culture and compromises social organization. It is culture that defines discursive/behavioral disturbance [...]. This stigma is of paramount importance, both for the labeled individual, and for the survival of the law<sup>128</sup>. (Dorvil 54)

Apart from the repression of the dominant culture, what Bigger has failed to take into account is the fact that his murder affects his own sensitivity because it comes from an instinctive and unreflective act, which without his consent, negatively impacts on his mental state to such an extent that he becomes impulsive, reacting violently to the slightest noise or the slightest surprise event in his nearest environment. Even though Bigger is initially excited over the murder of Mary (Brivic 237), which is normally contrary to the mental state of someone who killed an innocent girl, his mind records this horrific act and reminds him of it, especially when he is alone. In the following excerpt, Wright allows the reader to perceive the full mental state of Bigger after his murder:

It seems to Bigger that no sooner had he closed his eyes than he was wide awake again, suddenly and violently, as though someone had grabbed his shoulders and had shaken him. He lay on his back, in bed, hearing and seeing nothing. Then like an electric switch being clicked, he was aware that the room was filled with pale daylight [...]. He saw the room and snow falling past the window; but his mind formed no image of any of these. They simply existed, unrelated to each other; the snow and the daylight and the soft sound of breathing cast a strange spell upon him, a spell that waited for the wand of fear to touch it and endow it with reality and meaning [...] Then, in answer to a foreboding call from a dark part of his mind, he leaped from his bed and landed on his bare feet in the middle of the room. His heart raced; his lips parted; his legs trembled. He struggled to come full awake. He relaxed his taut muscles, feeling fear, remembering that he had killed Mary, had smothered her, had cut her head off and put her body in the fiery furnace. (NS, 87)

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<sup>128</sup> « C'est une rupture avec la culture, une baisse de la capacité homéostatique de la culture dominante. C'est une maladie qui se situe en diffraction par rapport à la culture ambiante. En fin de compte, ce n'est pas tant la façon dont un homme agit qui constitue le problème social, mais la façon dont la majorité le juge par rapport aux normes dominantes. Le fait d'enfreindre une règle remet en cause la culture dominante et compromet l'organisation sociale. C'est la culture qui définit une perturbation discursive/comportementale [...]. Cette stigmatisation s'avère d'une importance primordiale, et pour l'individu étiqueté, et pour la survie de la loi. »

Not only does Bigger have mental troubles as revealed above but also, as Aimé J. Ellis suggests, because he does not benefit from family care (Ellis 194). Bigger acts suspiciously towards his environment and even sees Mary's head on a newspaper, which could be likened to hallucination. When Bigger comes back to the furnace, he can see Mary's body even though it is burnt into ashes: "He glanced to the left and right to see if anyone was watching, then opened the furnace door and peered in, his eyes filled with the vision of Mary and her bloody throat [...]. But there was no sign of the body, even though the body's image hovered before his eyes" (NS, 103). As a result, he becomes more and more mentally so shocked and upset that he struggles to sleep: "He stretched out on the floor and sighed. He was drowsy, but when he was on the verge of sleep he jerked abruptly to a dull wakefulness" (NS, 205), and his mental disorder reminds us of Richard's in *Black Boy*.

The reasons for Richard's mental disorder are somewhat different from Bigger's. While Bigger is much more troubled by his murder which he did not plan but instinctively committed out of fear of a white female presence, Richard experiences mental disorder mostly because of his own violent family's physical and mental oppression on him. Richard's own family is the typical victim of dispossession which renders most of the members embittered. Bitterness and resentment make them unable to understand Richard's mental abnormal behaviors. As a consequence, they beat him so much that his mental disorder gets worse, as Richard himself testifies:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. [...] Whenever I tried to sleep I see wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me. Later, as I grew worse, I could see bags in the daytime with my eyes open and I was gripped by the fear that they were going to fall and drench me with some horrible liquid. Days and nights I begged my mother and father to take the bags away, pointing to them, shaking with terror because no one saw them but me. Exhaustion would make me drift toward sleep and then I would scream until I was wide awake again; I was afraid to sleep. (BB, 13)

Richard experiences the same mental issues as Bigger. This suggests that the characters in both works share the same concerns and make the same experience of dispossession. Since the same causes produce the same effects, Bigger has sleepless or murky nights like Richard. Bigger also has violent physical reactions just like Richard. The most difficult thing for Richard, however, is not these occasional mental crises at night but rather the fact that mental disorders permeate his whole life, including at work where he becomes mostly fearful, suspicious, and mentally weak as this excerpt demonstrates:

I went to job apprehensive, resolving to watch my every move. [...] A white man behind the counter ran up to me and shouted: 'A jug of Coca-Cola, quick, boy!' My body jerked taut and I stared at him. He stared at me. [...] Even though I tried, I could not have told him what was wrong. My preoccupation with curbing my impulses, my speech, my movements, my manner, my expressions had increased my anxiety. I became forgetful, concentrating upon more trivial tasks. (*BB*, 214)

This hostility makes Richard fearful even when faced with trustworthy people or with trivial situations. Richard is mentally troubled to such an extent that he is afraid of the river when his uncle Hoskins brings him there for a horse ride. He "looked at the mile stretch of water that laid ahead and leaped out in terror" (*BB*, 60). His mental imbalance even impacts on his early school days as he cannot even write his name on the board as though he has really forgotten it:

I was sent to the black board to write my name and address; I knew how to spell it; but standing at the black board with the eyes of the many girls and boys looking at my back made me freeze inside and I was unable to write a single letter. 'Write your name,' the teacher called to me. I lifted the white chalk to the blackboard and, as I was about to write, my mind went black, empty; I could not remember my name; not even the first letter. (*BB*, 85)

In a study of mental disorders conducted by Dorvil, he suggests that what is considered mentally abnormal behavior has to do with socialization. Through socialization, the social system expects all individuals to alienate from it. From this perspective, "a mentally abnormal behavior consists of an individual's inability to fulfill all of these social roles and duties" (Dorvil 55). However, according to Dorvil, "this inability must be seen as a failure of society as a whole to instill respect for norms, principles, laws, obligations and prohibitions" (55). In this respect, it can be argued that deviant behavior is not necessarily attributable to the one defined as mentally ill but attributable to certain defects in society such as injustice, deprivation, discrimination and marginalization (Faris, 1948). This is confirmed in Wright's fictional society, in particular with Richard and Bigger, whose behaviors deemed mentally abnormal are only the result of a lack of social reference, and even of marginalization preventing them from participating in the construction of social standards which they are, nevertheless, supposed to respect. Dorvil is categorical in his conclusion on the origins of mental disorders:

Today as yesterday, there is a social class disparity in the distribution of mental disorders. Due to their living conditions, the underprivileged class is deprived of preventive means, especially in times of crisis. If it is a declared mental illness, this poor class does more difficult, having no reserve of material goods and participating neither in the definition of societal norms, nor in social control. Unlike the upper class, she lacks the self-esteem that can boost immunity against mental disorders. This

consideration cannot be forgotten, even in the craze of the brilliant dopaminergic speculations of the day. (Dorvil 56)

Dorvil's bright conclusion perfectly applies to Wright's fictional context. Characters like Bigger perform mentally abnormal acts because of the disparities between him and white people. In a period of urban crisis in Chicago marked by intra and interracial violence, social norms are being severely challenged. Bigger tramples them on with his deviant behavior because he has been sidelined and does not participate in defining social and economic norms as he tells his lawyer Max:

Mr. Max, a guy gets tired of being told what he can do and can't do. You get a little job here and a little job there. You shine shoes, sweep streets; anything [...]. You don't make enough to live on. [...] You just keep moving all the time, doing what other folks say [...]. Well they own everything. They choke off the face of the earth [...]. They kill you before you die. (NS, 277)

In the context Bigger describes above, Richard also engages in acts contrary to social norms such as alcoholism and theft because he has been put outside the laws or standards and, therefore, does not feel obliged to respect them. As he aspires to escape to the North, he finds himself confronted with a lack of financial means. He has a chance to work for a Jew who warns him before hiring him that he cannot stand thieves or the mentally ill, that is, those who violate social norms. Despite all these warnings, Richard indulges in these mentally abnormal practices because he feels he has not been associated with setting the so-called mentally normal standards that his Jewish boss urges him to adhere to. By the way, he lets us know about it when he says:

I felt I had been emotionally cast out of the world, had been made to live outside the normal process of life, had been conditioned in feeling against something daily, had become accustomed to living on the side of those who watched and waited. Therefore, I reasoned, stealing was not a violation of my ethics, but of his; I felt that things were rigged in his favor and any action I took to circumvent his scheme of life was justified. (BB, 223)

According to Richard, the symbol of mental disorder is characterized by the action of an individual excluded from social norms and yet asked to respect them. What is considered to be a mentally abnormal act such as theft turns out to be an ethical code that the dispossessed characters constructs for themselves, failing to be associated with the values which society has decreed to be mentally just and normal. It is, therefore, the violation of these values which characterizes deviant behaviors qualified as mental disorder, but, in all three works, disorder is not exclusively mental. It is also social and cultural and it greatly destabilizes the main characters.

## 2. Socio-Cultural Instability

The fragmentation of dispossessed individuals is manifested by their difficulty in situating themselves in relation to their daily acts. When they are driven by the force of dispossession to commit acts that their dispossessors consider reprehensible because they undermine the peace of the society they control, those responsible for these so-called reprehensible acts often find themselves divided between rational and emotional explanations of their actions. One of the cases which illustrates this situation of psychological fragmentation is that of Bigger who commits two murders in *Native Son*. One could admit that the murder of Mary Dalton is the result of the social order imposed on Bigger. Furthermore, this murder takes place as Bigger, surprised by Mrs. Dalton, fears being discovered in the room of a white woman. In other words, Mary's murder looks like an accident and is the result of Bigger's emotional reaction to a white presence. However, can the same be said for Bessie's murder? The answer is definitely no.

While Mary's murder can logically be understood as a crime of fear or emotion, Bessie's appears to be the result of rational preparation. Indeed, after having enthralled Bessie in his plan to extort money from the Dalton family with the murder of Mary, Bigger plans to get rid of her for fear of her betrayal by reporting to the police:

He was afraid that he would have to kill her before it was all over. She would not do to take along, and he could not leave her behind. [...] It would be impossible to take her if she was going to act like this, and yet he could not leave her here. Coldly he knew that he had to take her with him, and that at some future time settle things with her [...]. He thought of it calmly, as if the decision were being handed down by some logic not his own, over which he had no control. (*NS*, 170, 215)

Through this text, we can perceive that Bigger is torn between the love of Bessie, which is an emotional component he cannot leave behind him and the rational evidence that he should get rid of her to ensure his own survival. Bigger's fragmented state of psychological experience becomes more evident when he thinks about his two crimes:

What was he after? [...] What did he love and what did he hate? There was something he knew and something he felt; something the world gave him and something he had, [...] and never in his life, with this black skin of his, had the two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together, never had he felt a sense of wholeness [...] only under the stress of hate was the conflict resolved. (*NS*, 225)

As it becomes clearer, Bigger's psychological experience is fragmented between emotion and reason and he does not seem to know a way out, which can be read in line with Brivic's

comment that, “there are two Bigger,” fragmented “between Bigger’s reason and his feeling, between what is imposed on him, the crime as accident, and his innermost desires, and the crime as purpose” (Brivic 237-238). Brivic goes further beyond psychological fragmentation to consider that this fragmentation is in fact related to political fragmentation: “The rational side of Bigger, which is forced into murder, is linked to communism through Bigger’s relation to Boris Max, while the emotional side, which takes pride in the murder, is related to fascism in Bigger’s vision of himself as a criminal superman and his attraction to dictators” (238). In the same line, Scruggs accounts for Bigger’s psychological fragmentation by the fact that he is not authentic since he is just the product of the street and mass media: “In short, he is not authentic in large part because he does not have the imagination, the words, the language, to name the content of his seething cauldron in any other terms but those of the movies, magazines and newspapers he has seen” (Scruggs 154-155). James Butler falls in behind Scruggs to give a concrete example of Bigger’s feelings being conditioned by the movies he has seen:

Bigger connects Mary with the film he has seen which gives a romantic view of rich white women who will do anything. Such films fill him with a sense of deep excitement because they evoke a sense of possibility which is a natural part of his character that has been frustrated by his environment. Linking his perception of the movie with a remembered story of a white woman who has actually married her chauffeur, he goes to work with the Daltons with a sense that the job must contain something big. (Butler 13)

Implicit in Butler’s comment is that Bigger stands, or one may say is fragmented, between emotional and fantastic possibilities in working with a white girl and the realistic or pragmatic dangerous risks that such possibilities can entail. In other terms, Bigger is torn between his mass media education luring him with emotional possibilities and his social nurturing limiting his psychological yearning towards emotional possibilities with white women.

The idea of fragmentation among the dispossessed people assumes that one or more parts of themselves are broken up into several other parts. In other words, these people have lost their wholeness. Carl Vaught believes that,

Human wholeness is made intelligible and accessible to us by the human space in which we exist, and which is constituted by the human community, by the uniqueness of the individual within it, [...] and by what is ultimate and unconditioned, a source of power and meaning that sustain our existence (Vaught 9-11).

Jacob Howland carries this remark further noting that, “It is within this space that each individual’s quest for wholeness takes place” (Howland 118). The quest for wholeness, Howland goes on, “finally requires individuals to turn back toward and stand before their origins, so that they may come to terms with their unique identity and hold together all three

dimensions of the human space in a way that will secure wholeness” (Howland 118). To achieve wholeness, therefore, the individual needs to identify with a welcoming and unconditioned space and community. However, in the case of Wright’s dispossessed characters, their space (as Vaught and Howland define it) is not only conditioned and shrunk but the community they must identify with is also fragmented because of dispossession. This can be understood through the analysis of *Uncle Tom’s Children* by McCarthy who goes as far as claiming, “The black world is in fragments; under martial law, it has no rights. There is no family, no community, no functional religion, no reward for service, no humaneness, simply chaos. Mann is clearly out of place in such a world without law” (McCarthy 734).

Although in *Uncle Tom’s Children* one can perceive community efforts to preserve their wholeness, the sequence of events in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* demonstrates the deprivation of space and the failure of the community to ensure the whole development of all individuals. In this case, Richard, Hoskins, and Ella in *Black Boy* do not benefit from space and community to avoid fragmentation (*BB*, 63-64; 136). Richard is being lugged around and manhandled from family to family precisely because of his attempts to piece his fragmented life together, not to mention Bigger’s family whose shrinking space is illustrated in the opening scene as we saw earlier. It is, therefore, safe to say that the absence of wholeness among these dispossessed characters reflects their fragmentation in several areas of living conditions, be they financial, political, or cultural.

The fragmentation of the characters’ lives is blatantly felt in their socio-cultural lives, and is expressed quite simply by an absence of neither personal nor collective perspectives. In this context of loss of personal initiative, their attempts to exist as individuals or in their community are guided by their own sociological, cultural and identity norms. Because they evolve under the domination of a group which imposes its constraints and standards, all the characters experience fragmentation in all aspects of life. Richard in *Black Boy* perfectly illustrates this point when he describes his loss of identity due to the fragmentary life imposed on him by society:

I had been what my surrounding had demanded, what my family, conforming to the dictates of the Whites above them, had exacted of me, and what the white had said I must be. Never being fully able to be myself, I had slowly learned that the South recognize but a part of a man, could accept but a fragment of his personality, and all the rest, the best and deepest things of heart and mind was tossed away in blind ignorance and hate. (*BB*, 296)

As Richard reveals, he has got no wholeness in terms of deciding what his present and future will look like because of the constraining environment which weighs heavily upon him.



Blacks' individual wholeness is not recognized in the South. Only fragments of their personality are recognized. The family's violent manners toward Richard is the result of "distorted love" because while it seeks to protect Richard from being lynched because of his rebellion to the oppressive system, it also destroys his "individuality" (Smith 127). Yet one cannot achieve anything consistent and sustainable unless one has control over one's whole life and, therefore, has not to struggle with fragmentary acts or norms. When one's wholeness is fragmented and controlled by other people, one will surely be faced with contradictory injunctions in accordance with the fluctuations of other people's moods and interests. Jay Melching is quite right when he comments, "Richard faces paradoxical injunctions: Speak! But don't speak your own words. Your own words are dangerous" (Melching 284), which is evidenced by the Valedictorian speech scene in *Black Boy* where Richard is faced with the principal's attempts to force him to speak to the guests in the words he has written for him to read:

'You know, we've never had a boy in this school like you before,' he [the principal] said. 'You've had your own way around here. [...] But, listen, take this speech and say it. I know what's best for you. You can't afford to just say *anything* before those white people that night.' [...] 'I've been a principal for more years than you are old, boy. I've seen many a boy and girl graduate from this school, and none of them was too proud to recite a speech I wrote for them.' (BB, 193).

Later on, "Richard faces a warning that words are dangerous, at least in the presence of white people. Speak, but say nothing. Silence yourself" (Melching 284-285). Actually, Richard is supposed to keep quiet when his words threaten the interests of his oppressors. But when his words serve their interests, he is encouraged to speak honestly just as Melching confirms: "As opposed to the previous injunction to speak but to say nothing, this injunction leads the 'black boy' to speak, but always speak truthfully" (285), which is clear in the scene where Richard takes a job interview with a white woman:

'Now, boy, I want to ask you one question and I want you to tell me the truth,' she said.  
'Yes, Ma'am,' I said, all attention.  
'Do you steal?' she asked me seriously.  
I burst into a laugh, then checked myself.  
'What's so damn funny about that?' She asked.  
'Lady, if I was a thief I'll never tell anybody.'  
I had made a mistake during my first five minutes in the white world. I hung my head,  
'No ma'am,' I mumbled, 'I don't steal.'  
She stared at me trying to make up her mind.  
'Now, look, we don't want a sassy nigger around her,' she said.  
'No ma'am' I assured her, 'I'm not sassy.' (BB, 160-161)

The same paradoxical injunctions, as exposed by Melching, are also present in *Native Son* where his fictional environment suggests Bigger can kill but not a member of the dominant group. This can be understood while analyzing Bigger's murders. When he kills Bessie, there is no charge against him, but when he kills Mary Dalton, his white boss's daughter, he is sentenced to death. In a nutshell, it should be said that the characters are almost deprived of everything essential. Therefore, they are pushed to live and act in a fragmented way according to the moods and wills of their oppressors. This fragmentary life depends on the will of the dominant group in a way that induces another form of fragmentation which I call "intra-community fragmentation".

Those who are submitted to dispossession feel excluded from the national identity defined by the dominant class, yet they tend to create or aspire to build their own, to rediscover their whole cultural identity. This "minor identity" takes shape within the national or "major" one and, at the same time, carries the risk of separatism, which Wright fought against throughout his writing and through works like *Black Boy*. In this novel, Richard tries to avoid separatism but finds himself further fragmented within his own community which rejects his deconstructionist mind. Richard is not against the wholeness of Black American identity. Far from it, he encourages the construction of a recognized black identity but, at the same time, promotes a kind of cultural or civilizational melting pot where all communities can find common values acceptable and accepted by all without fragmenting and depriving any of them. Because culture or civilization is in constant *différance*, it may seem ambivalent, or even irrelevant, to use the same language and cultural traits to highlight otherness. That is the reason why minor groups situate themselves "in-between" and by so doing create a "third space", to quote Homi Bhabha:

The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation, *the place of utterance*, is crossed by the *différance* of writing. [...] The linguistic difference that informs any cultural performance is dramatized in the common semiotic account of the disjuncture between the subject of a proposition (*énoncé*) and the subject of enunciation, which is not represented in the statement but which is the acknowledgment of its discursive embeddedness and address, its cultural positionality, its reference to a present time and a specific space. The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. (Bhabha 36)

Bhabha associates with Derrida to defend the "undecidability" of language and meaning. Culture is just a text and because of linguistic and cultural differences, its interpretation cannot

be a mere matter of statements between the I and the You. For mutual cultural understanding and respect of every culture on an equal footing, the I and the You should move out of the respective places to meet in the Third Space where common meaning can be reached through negotiations.

By describing deprived characters but by empowering them thanks to their actions and inner acts, Wright proposed his version of the Third Space before Bhabha. During his whole life and literary career, Wright always fought for Whites and Blacks to meet in the same space where discrimination, stereotypes and prejudices did not exist and where cross-racial communication, understanding and recognition were favored. It should be noted that Bhabha's concept is neither all about cultural separatism nor cultural diversity. Experience has shown that in cultural diversity, there has always been the propensity of one group to universalize its culture over others viewed as minor groups with minor cultures. Yet, if one group is put in the margin, it becomes difficult to reach the center but the Third Space offers a possibility of reordering subjectivity and of gaining recognition to reach that center. That is why negotiation is of paramount importance for the I and the You to be able to meet in this Third Space and to give it its full relevance:

The process of re-inscription and negotiation, the insertion or intervention of something that takes on new meaning, happens in the temporal break in-between the sign, deprived of subjectivity, in the realm of the intersubjective. Through this time-lag, the temporal break in representation, emerges the process of agency both as a historical development and as the narrative agency of historical discourse [...]. It is in the contingent tension that results, that sign and symbol overlap and are indeterminately articulated through the 'temporal break.' Where the sign deprived of the subject, inter-subjectivity, returns as subjectivity directed towards the rediscovery of truth, then a (re)ordering of symbols becomes possible in the sphere of the social. When the sign ceases the synchronous flow of the symbol, it also seizes the power to elaborate, through the time-lag, new and hybrid agency of articulations. This is the movement of revisions. (191-192)

Negotiation permits to reinscribe new meanings in-between the sign. Usually, the culture of those who are considered as minor is misinterpreted or misrepresented by the dominant group, which deprives the minor group of subjectivity as is the case of Blacks in Wright's novels.

Through negotiation towards the Third Space, however, it becomes possible to reinscribe the black subject and to rebuild true inter-subjectivity made up of white and black cultural traits. In Wright's world, this appears as the only safe way to rediscover truth about both cultures and to reorder interpretation and representation in a process of hybrid agency of articulations. Thus, the hybridity Bhabha points to is a specific one consisting in cultural

difference in lieu of cultural diversity, a difference which should not be viewed as creating and extending gaps but rather as uniting communities. As Derrida observes,

Difference [...] does not isolate itself by distancing itself but by scrupulously deepening a community of intentions, by revealing enigmas hidden under values that are now accepted and respected, modern values, no doubt, but already traditional enough to become a common ground for criticism, so that we begin to reflect on them and to suspect them<sup>129</sup>. (Derrida, 1967, 15)

Taking Derrida's observation into account, it is clear that Bhabha's hybridity implies a cultural difference which must be recognized by both cultures that must negotiate to find a third space to shape a common cultural identity or, to borrow from Derrida, "a community of intentions." The concept of cultural difference enables Black Americans to negotiate with the Whites and to affirm their culture instead of being crashed down. In Wright's fictional universe, however, Richard certainly regrets to inform the reader that black culture is denied, let alone its difference, and the Bhabhaian Third Space is still far away as he is left alone to fight tooth and nail against socio-cultural discrimination and disintegration.

Richard deplores the lack of Blacks' integration into the national identity: "Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of Black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it" (*BB*, 45). However, Richard seems to find himself lonely in his integrationist fight, since neither the dominant class nor the dominated one espouses his idea. As a result, Richard himself becomes fragmented between two worlds, one discriminating against him quite simply because he does not meet the identity criteria defined by the dominant group, the other rejecting him because of his revolutionary ideas and his calls for the recognition of heterogeneous identity in a larger cultural whole. Richard is, therefore, one of those Black s whom Maaloum describes as being victims of double identity fragmentation due to their relationship with Whites as well as with their own community:

Black male fragmentation also functions in the same way in its relation to the black community. As much as the tension between black masculine characters and their kindred reveals their homelessness and their psychological malaise, it also foregrounds the mythological character or race and folk culture as stable categories of identification. As with the white community, the fracture of the black masculinity attests to the black community's attempts to suppress and its unwillingness to recognize heterogeneity [...].

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<sup>129</sup> « Différence [...] ne s'isole pas en prenant des distances mais en approfondissant scrupuleusement une communauté d'intentions, en faisant apparaître des énigmes cachées sous des valeurs aujourd'hui acceptées et respectées, valeurs modernes sans doute mais déjà assez traditionnelles pour devenir un lieu commun de la critique, donc pour qu'on commence à les réfléchir et à les suspecter. »

Black male characters [...] are sidelined by their familial and social demands for conformity and subjected to violence and completely excommunicated for rebellion against the social values defining the black status quo. (Maaloum 303-304)

Maaloum's comment is quite true to Bigger's and Richard's lives because, following their identity dispossession by society and their families, they become the victims of "different forms of fragmentation, ranging from physical dismemberment to moral and personal negation" (298).

Identity dispossession leads the dominated group to go beyond alienation to reach self-negation and effacement, because of the American refusal of difference which prevents them to develop as a whole and find their place in cultural hybridity (Maaloum, 2014; McCarthy, 1999). In other words, Black identity is fragmented because it does not fit into the humanistic mode of identification of the dominant class which consider themselves as self and the dispossessed as Other (Maaloum 2014). Dispossessed subjects are not stable but rather fragmented in a way that they lack homogeneity and are split between many interpretations (Maaloum 2014). Wright expressed the Black subject's fragmented life as he was himself a victim of white oppression and the prey to powerlessness and subservience reserved to Blacks. Wright's perspective shows the Black subject is able to fit neither into the white nor Black culture. In this respect, Du Bois talked about cultural hybridity through double-consciousness or the veil of color in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. According to him, Blacks strove to act according to the white representation of themselves to survive while struggling to preserve their consciousness as Blacks (Du Bois, 1903). In such circumstances, Blacks have no stable space where they can develop a unique and coherent community identity because, as Bhabha puts it, community is already viewed as an antagonist supplement of modernity:

Community is the antagonist supplement of modernity: in the metropolitan space it is the territory of the minority, threatening the claims of civility; in the transnational world, it becomes the border-problem of the diasporic, the migrant, the refugee. Binary division of social space neglect the profound temporal disjunction, the transnational time and space, through which minority communities negotiate their collective identifications. (Bhabha 231)

If building a community is antagonistic to the modernity controlled by the majority, it threatens what it considers as civility. Therefore, it is undeniable the majority group has created a binary social division on purpose not only to maintain the minor group in the margin but also to fragment it. Such a proceeding prevents the group from uniting as a stable community. Once their lives are fragmented, they have no home and, indeed, home has come to mean a fragmented experience rather than a stable site defined by race, family or nation as is the case

with Bigger (Maaloum 2014; Wilhite 1999). All these hard realities induced by dispossession lead the Wrightean characters into intra-community violence which sometimes results in death.

The persistence of dispossession leads those who suffer from it to blame one another. Instead of organizing to fight against dispossession, they fight against their own brothers and sisters who are living symptoms of it. This type of intra-community violence manifests as a form of verbal and even physical aggression. Failing to fight the dispossessors for lack of economic and political means, the characters who are victims of dispossession pour out their anger on the members of their own community. That is what Kadeshia Mathews calls “transference of violence” (Mathews 283), which manifests itself in Bigger’s behavior. Lacking enough courage to violate a white man’s store called Blum, Bigger psychologically transfers his intention to Gus as a weaker target (283). Bigger’s violent attitude toward Gus can be included in the overall intra-community violence which arises as a result of dispossession.

Bigger’s violence sometimes turns against Blacks because it is only through physical violence that he takes power in his social group (278; 286). Physical strength and fighting skills only determine one’s value in Black urban life (286), which is “colonized” by the dominant class (NS, 307), in such a way that, according to Fanon, “the dreams of the natives are always of muscular prowess [...] of action and aggression” (Fanon 52-53). Respective of Fanon’s remark, Bigger manifests his muscular prowess and aggression by knocking Gus down and forcing him to lick his knife (NS, 36). Though Bigger may not be conscious of it, Mercer points out that it is his powerlessness to white dispossession that strengthens his violent power as a whole against his fellows, most specifically his female counterparts:

The kind of “power” acted out in the brutal violence of rape and sexual abuse is, in fact, a further expression of powerlessness, as it does nothing to challenge the underlying structure of oppression, but only “passes on” the violence of the dominant white male, via the psychic process of internalization, into the black community and on to black women [and men], hence reinforcing their oppression at the end of the chain of colonial violence. (Mercer 146)

Analyzing the same scene where Bigger forces Gus to lick his knife, Ellis sees the knife as “a symbol of Bigger’s penis” which is a further symbol of masculinity and power” (Ellis 191), a power he uses against his own kinsmen to symbolically recover his dispossessed masculinity. In the same way, in *Black Boy*, Richard is taught right from childhood that the only way one can work his opinion through his fellows is by using violence. We still remember Ella teaching him how to lock horns with street gangs, let alone the fact that all his childhood is punctuated with violence which teaches him that only moral and physical tenacity ensures survival within

his community. Ella teaches Richard street violence “as if violence in the Black Community has become a subculture, a way of life” (Makombe 303).

It is precisely the social, political and economic dispossessions that render characters like Bigger embittered and violent towards each other. “The economic, social and political racism of 1930s Chicago has had such an insidious effect on Bigger that he has become a cauldron of feelings ready to boil over at the slightest provocation into violence” (Sullivan *et al.* 408). Generally, in real-life situations, economic and political deprivations provoke embitterment among the victims. That is the reason why poor quarters like the Black Belt experience daily violence, a violence which Bigger signals right at the onset of *Native Son* through the rat scene where one can measure the violence with which he crashes down the adventurous rat as though to warn from the very beginning that any-one who troubles him will be crashed down like a rat; and indeed, Bigger later puts his warning into practice as he stifles Mary into death and crashes down Bessie’s head just as he did the rat in the opening scene.

Wright makes use of ironic images to convey the very deep meaning of violence. Violence is described through sexual satisfaction and brutal love making (Butler 1986). Though Richard does not crash anyone down, maybe because of his younger age which does not permit him to do so, he does punch Black gangs in the street, strike blows on a schoolboy, and fight back his family members who want to trouble him, which supports his contention that Whites have planted the risk of becoming a murderer in all Blacks’ minds. This “Whites’ risk plantation,” that Makombe mentions in his analysis and borrows from Fanon, is highly strategic as it aims at “a state of rage that the colonizer instills in the colonized and prevent them from boiling over by maintaining internecine feuds. These conflicts are not progressive; they divert the attention of the oppressed from the disease (the oppressor) to symptoms (other victims of oppression)” (Fanon in Makombe 298). This pattern can be seen through Richard and Harrison trapped to fight each other with a view, taking Fanon’s analysis for granted, to diverting their awareness from their lack of apprenticeship in the optical shop in Memphis. Even though a sensitive thinker like Richard understands earlier such an improper game and tries to escape from it, it is not until adulthood that other dispossessed characters like Bigger understand they are all bagged in the oppressor’s strategy. Because those who live under dispossession have no efficient weapons against it, some of them adopt flight as a strategy to survive.

Flight is an important pattern in Wright’s fictional works as it is provoked by the risk of being dispossessed of life and is supposed to permit them to preserve their lives under constant threats of lynching. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the Southern Black population hugely moved to the North. Among those who moved, whether within the South or to the Northern cities,

some were actually fleeing daily persecutions which were parts of the Jim Crow system and which threatened to take their lives away. Thousands of Blacks poured into Chicago because of extralegal lynching at the end of the twentieth century enforced by “the legal Apartheid of Jim Crow life” (Ellis 182). This historic reality permeates Wright’s three works. Indeed, flight is ubiquitous everywhere ranging from *Uncle Tom’s Children* with Big Boy, Buck, Lester, Mann, Johnny-Boy, *Native Son* with Bigger Thomas, to *Black Boy* with young Richard. The basic goal of these flights is to escape either social death as is the case with Richard or physical death as is the case with the rest of the already-mentioned characters. In the specific case of Richard, Butler (1986) suggests that far from being a purposeless and incoherent flight, Richard embraces flight to free himself from his racist environment and to become a full man and artist. For sure, Butler is not putting words in Richard’s mouth when he confirms his flight northward: “An hour later I was sitting in a Jim Crow coach, speeding northward, making the first lap of my journey to a land where I could live with a little less fear” (*BB*, 227).

Whereas his father’s movement simply amounts to desertion or evasion, Richard’s flight northward testifies his intention to engage himself with reality instead of dwelling in permanent dreaming and fear in the South (Butler 12). As though flight were a vital issue when dealing with dispossessed lives, a whole part entitled “Flight” is dedicated to the issue in *Native Son*. Actually, flight in Wright’s works mirrors Deleuze’s lines of flight as one can see the protagonists leave traces behind their trajectories. Flight also reminds the reader of the archetypal fleeing black slaves which usually transpire in slave narratives and reveals that, even though they have been freed, they are still compelled by disguised slavery to be on constant flight. In his works, Wright makes use of all his strongest linguistic skills to describe in details the conditions under which Bigger’s flight takes place and how useless flight can sometimes become in the context of oppression. In *Native Son* as well as *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Black Boy*, no character fleeing physical death escapes. In such circumstances, where flight is part of the daily routines of the dispossessed individuals, Johnson suggests it is an existential act and therefore a necessary one. He goes further to say that the “fleeing Black American constitutes an archetypal symbol in African American literature” (Johnson 288). Most of the time, this symbol ends up in social or physical death.

The ultimate consequence of dispossession is, thus, death. But one must distinguish between social and physical death. When one is no longer paid attention to, except in exploitation and oppression, when one is deprived of all the socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-moral and socio-political referents, when one is locked out of any future prospects, it can safely be said that one is socially dead. Considering Bigger’s case in *Native Son*, it can be said



that he is faced with social death before experiencing physical death. All around his environment and most specifically in the Dalton's where he spends most of his time, Bigger is never paid attention to as a valuable human being. Butler (1986) goes so far as to suggest that his individuality and subjectivity are ignored. White society is blind to his individuality and subjectivity. This situation leads him to commit crime to gain subjectivity or identity, which confirms "identity is claimed either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining the center" (Bhabha 177). Only Bigger's physical presence as a child-like and docile boy is seen (Maaloum 133-134). In such a context of white hegemony, Patterson confirms in his monographic work entitled *Slavery and Social Death* that "Blacks, Bigger in particular, are victims of social death" (Patterson 160). This kind of death has become recurrent because of the trivialization of the lives of the dispossessed subjects as is evidenced by Agamben:

The subject existing at the absolute minimal end of the circulation and accumulation of power is the *homo sacer*, or "bare life," of Roman law: that is, the subject who can be killed by anyone without the killing being considered either a homicide or sacrilege. *Bare life*, in other words, is neither human nor sacred, and since the taking of this life is neither a homicide nor a sacrilege, it defines the boundaries of these two realms. (Agamben in JanMohamed 161-162)

It can be claimed, without much risk of being mistaken, that the characters who live under dispossession in Wright's novels experience a bare life as in the Roman tradition, a kind of life that anyone can take away without it being qualified as a crime. This is true to Bessie Mears who is killed without her murder being considered as a crime while Mary's murder is judged as premeditated crime even though it is accidental. Saying that social death is just an omen of physical death in the lives of Wright's characters is an understatement. Death is the common fate of every human being but the Wrightean characters appear to suffer more from forced death than those belonging to the dominant social group. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, a number of key figures such as Lester, Silas, Mann, Johnny-Boy, Sue, Bessie, Bigger, Bob and Hoskins get killed, which raises an important question: Why forced death is, ironically, the prerogative of minor and dispossessed subjects? The answer is given by Johnson (2007) who explains that death is a symbol used by Wright to show the vulnerability of subjects who have nothing and have been deprived of everything. It is such a social vulnerability that leads some of them into social flaws.

When an individual is economically dispossessed, the immediate result is poverty. Looking closely at Wright's works, it can be noticed that his characters have no stable jobs to ensure them even three dishes per day, let alone provide for healthcare or send their children to school. Poverty intensely manifests itself in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, it often happens that, due to endemic poverty, Blacks as well as Whites cannot meet their daily needs, which compels them to fall back on relief services to provide for their daily bread. In this regard, it is worth recalling that poverty shakes the Thomases's family to such an extent all the family members are cornered in one shanty house. It also appears worthy to recall the situation of pauperization of Richard's family which almost lacks everything: No means to provide for healthcare (Ella's infirmity tells much about this reality), no possibility to send children to school for a good education (Richard has not gone beyond eighth grade and is obliged to practice self-teaching), and no sufficient food to eat (Richard is constantly hungry). Yet every poverty situation has various corollaries which negatively impact on people in a way that they end up becoming embittered and aggressive, as is the case with Bigger who constantly gets into passion with his siblings:

'Bigger's setting here like he ain't glad to get a job,' Buddy kindly said.  
'What do you want me to do?' Shout?' shouts Bigger.'  
'Oh, Bigger!' Buddy tries to keep him cool.  
'I wish you'd keep your big mouth out of this,' he bitterly 'told his sister.' (NS, 121-122)

As already mentioned, poverty is greatly responsible for the flaring rise of juvenile delinquency. In hopeless social and economic situations, when young people have to choose between staying in extreme poverty or earning money in exchange for serving illegal groups, the second choice sometimes takes the upper hand on the first one. If society fails to ensure the welfare of the youth, they finally give up to any available alternative presented to them, no matter it is right, just, legal, illegal, or criminal. Therefore, it can be said that poverty is the stool on which juvenile delinquency leans to reach the youth. The various forms of deprivation which the poor experience tend to push them into spaces where they have no other solution than living in precarious housing conditions. Such is, for instance, the case of the Black Belt which concentrates the majority of the poor population in Chicago. Yet in such a space, those who live there do not benefit from all the necessary social services such as water, sanitation and electricity. Tenements are also too expensive and beyond their purchasing power, which compels them to move from one house to another in quest of less expensive tenement as Richard informs us: "Finally we could no longer pay the rent for our dingy flat; the few dollars that Granny had left us before she went home were gone. Half sick and in despair, my mother made the rounds of the charitable institutions, seeking help" (BB, 346). In the Black Belt, young people have no place to meet, to have fun, to talk about their future plans, to share their joy, pain and fear, in a word, to express their youth. As the saying goes, "Boys will be boys," and if

no condition is created for boys to be boys, such a situation deprives them of pleasure and creativity, which strengthens their feeling of abandonment, frustration and despair and leads them to throw a tantrum with their family members as Richard does:

What irked me was the ceaseless talk and no action. If someone suggested that my father be killed, I would perhaps have become interested; if someone had suggested that his name never be mentioned, I no doubt have agreed; if someone had suggested that we move to another city, I would have been glad. But there was only endless talk that led nowhere and I began to keep away from home as much as possible, preferring the simplicity of the streets to the worried, futile talk at home. (*BB*, 36)

As can be felt from this excerpt, because families fail to come to terms with domestic frustrations and despair, young people pour out into the street and this results in urban criminality. As Richard's words reveal above, it is family failure that leads him to nourish criminal thoughts and to prefer street life with all its risks of depravation due to the lack of proper education. Bigger also experiences Richard's frustration with his family in a way he is so embittered that he becomes ready to boil into violence for the slightest provocation (Sullivan *et al.* 408). When Bhabha's Third Space is unreachable and dispossession or oppression lingers on, some of Wright's characters end up adjusting to their environment by assimilating it. This strategy gives them the opportunity to cope with their social and cultural plight.

### **3. Assimilationist Adjustment**

There are times in the individual's life when he finds himself in a hostile environment from which he cannot escape. Under these conditions, two choices may be open to him. Either he resists his environment at the risk of being crushed if this environment is too strong for him, or bends to the conditions and requirements of his environment to negotiate the conditions of his existence. In the case of some of Wright's characters, the last choice is often made, namely to adjust to their environment, because this choice carries less risk than that of resistance. In reality, the choice to adjust to the hostile environment is not made on a voluntary basis but rather on a mandatory one because, in any case, dispossession leaves them little room in which they can resist. Shelby argues that the choice of adjustment is necessary and understandable, especially when it allows them to survive. "There are moments in each story," Shelby contends, "when a main character will acquiesce to injustice to avoid serious physical harm, to protect loved ones, to live to fight another day, or to die a more meaningful death at a later time. These are permissible in the ethics of the oppressed" (517). Shelby's comment finds its justification in *Uncle Tom's Children*, most specifically in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," as the clothing

store scene shows. In fact, when Richard enters the clothing store, he sees an old Black woman who is beaten into injury before being “accused of being drunk, thrown into a patrol wagon” (*UTC*, 8). Following this incident that Richard judges unjust, he tells it to his folks, hoping for their rebellious response. However, he soon realizes that they have already taken oppression for granted and adjusted to it as the rest of the scene testifies:

That day at noon, while eating in a hamburger joint, I told my fellow Negro porters what had happened. No one seemed surprised. One fellow, after swallowing a huge bite, turned to me and asked: ‘Hunh! Is tha’ all they did t’ her?’  
‘Yeah. Wasn’t tha’ enough?’ I asked.  
‘Shucks! Man, she’s a lucky bitch!’ he said, burying his lips deep into a juicy hamburger. ‘Hell, it’s a wonder they didn’t lay her when they got through.’ (*UTC*, 9)

As Shelby has shown, it is really sometimes no use fighting against or resisting dispossession because of the balance of forces which is in favor of the dispossessors. Richard does not appear to understand this reality as he is puzzled about his peers’ passive response. In any case, the dispossessors will not just cross their arms and watch the dispossessed people fight to recover their material and non-material belongings, because such an attitude would infer that they accept their own interests being threatened. Since the dispossessors live on the sweat of the dispossessed people, any attempt of the latter to leap out of dispossession becomes a vital issue for the dispossessors. That is why dispossession is always used along with strategies to compel those who are dispossessed to assimilate or adjust to the values of dispossession. These strategies include “restricting access to material resources, physical constraints of freedom and control over the body in a way that the dispossessed have no choice but to internalize their situation under their skin and act according to its dictates” (Prilleltensky, Gonick 130). Such an acceptance can be regarded as internalized oppression (David, 2014; Tappan, 2006). Aileen Moreton-Robinson refers to it as “ontological dispossession because it becomes part of the ontology of the dispossessed” (Moreton-Robinson 87). This ontological dispossession leads the subject, to borrow Fanon’s words, into acute “epidermalization of inferiority complex resulting from psychic alienation” which encourages him to accept his own uselessness and adjust to the stereotypes of the oppressors (Fanon, 1952, 8). Fanon further contends that psychic alienation makes that the only thing which matters for a Black man is to enter the white world:

For him, there is only one way out and it leads into the white world. Hence this permanent concern to attract the attention of the white world, this concern to be powerful like the white, this determined will to acquire the properties of coating, that is to say the part of being or having that enters into the constitution of an ego. As we said earlier, it is from the inside that the black man will try to reach the white sanctuary. Attitude refers to intention. Self-retraction as a successful defense process is impossible

for black people. He needs a white sanction [...] No, really, the good and merciful God cannot be black. He is a white man with very rosy cheeks. From black to white, such is the line of mutation. We are white as we are rich, as we are beautiful, as we are intelligent<sup>130</sup>. (41)

Since dispossession of black identity is met with favorable response among the white community, they instill it into the dispossessed subjects by means of stereotypes so as to make them assimilate and act them out. These stereotypes are so ubiquitous in the daily lives of the characters that they end up strengthening them through conscious or unconscious attitude for fear of the reprisals of the dominant social group. One of the stereotypical behaviors that the dispossessed display is the Sambo stereotype (Boskin, 1986). It is a stereotype that defines Blacks as always being happy to serve their masters, having a childish, simple-minded and docile, irrespective of any situation they live therein. This stereotype is taken for granted in *Black Boy* to such an extent that Whites become as astonished as nervous to meet a single black subject not acting it out, just as the narrative suggests. “Why don’t you laugh and talk like the other niggers?” a white man asks Richard before warning him, “I don’t like your looks, nigger. Now get [away]!” (*BB*, 201). Why did Whites prefer the Blacks who display the Sambo stereotype to reluctant Blacks like Richard is an important question many an analyst could ask. Maaloum’s long comment provides part of the answer:

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

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<sup>130</sup> « Pour lui, il n’existe qu’une porte de sortie et elle donne sur le monde blanc. D’où cette préoccupation permanente d’attirer l’attention du monde Blanc, ce souci d’être puissant comme le Blanc, cette volonté déterminée d’acquérir les propriétés de revêtement, c’est à dire la partie d’être ou d’avoir qui entre dans la constitution d’un moi. Comme nous le disions tout à l’heure, c’est par l’intérieur que le Noir va essayer de rejoindre le sanctuaire blanc. L’attitude renvoie à l’intention. La rétraction du moi en tant que processus de défense réussi est impossible au Noir. Il lui faut une sanction blanche. [...] Non, vraiment, le Dieu bon et miséricordieux ne peut pas être noir, c’est un Blanc qui a des joues bien roses. Du Noir au Blanc, telle est la ligne de mutation. On est blanc comme on est riche, comme on est beau, comme on est intelligent. »

disorder, the qualities of black passion and lack of restraint allow whites [...] to order their fear of failing their dream and civilization. (Maaloum 102)

Boskin (1986) supplements Maaloum's analysis, arguing that the Sambo stereotype is encouraged by Whites so as to hide the inhuman face of human bondage and oppression or to justify them. This stereotype lingered on to the post-slavery era, leading protest writers such as Wright to insist in their fictional works "on the barrenness and limitations of Blacks' existence to fight against the myth of the ever-joyful black man which racists used too often to play down the effects of oppression"<sup>131</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 202). These stereotypes were "consistently and authoritatively transmitted in each generation from parent to child that it seems almost a biological fact" (Boskin 12). As a result, docility, naivety, simple-mindedness, heedlessness and emotionlessness become part of the cultural pattern of the black characters, in accordance with what the dispossessors expect from them. Such a cultural pattern is exposed by Richard in *Black Boy*:

The pupils were a docile lot, lacking in that keen sense of rivalry which made the boys and girls who went to public school a crowd, in which a boy was tested and weighed, in which a glimpse of what the world was. These boys and girls were will-less, their speech flat, their gestures vague, the personalities devoid of anger, hope, laughter, enthusiasm, passion, or despair. I was able to see them with objectivity that was inconceivable to them. (*BB*, 115)

Because stereotypes are *de facto* imposed on black subjects from one generation to another, they assimilate and act them out whether Whites are present or absent. Indeed, vagueness, flat speech, simple-mindedness and naivety are part of Miss Bess's attitude towards Richard. In fact, no sooner does young Richard become acquainted with Miss Bess than she already wants to have sex and get married with him, which obviously baffles him:

'I wanna get married now. I wanna love,' she said.  
I had never met anyone like her [...]  
'Do you know what this means?' she asked me as she rose and went to a table and picked up a comb and came and stood before me. I stared at the comb, then at her.  
'What're you talking about?' I asked.  
She did not answer. She smiled, then came close to me and reached out with the comb and touched my head. I drew back. I stared at her, completely baffled [...]. Her simplicity frightened me. (*BB*, 237-240)

The rest of the scene shows that, indeed, Richard logically refuses to give up to Bess's simple-minded and naïve attitude which is worthy of a Jim Crow stereotype.

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<sup>131</sup> « Il insiste sur le dénuement et les limites de l'existence noire pour combattre le mythe du Noir toujours heureux que les racistes utilisaient trop souvent pour minimiser les effets de l'oppression. »

The Jim Crow stereotype is another racial stereotype which is projected in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. It is so ubiquitous in Blacks' lives that Wright built a whole short story entitled "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" in *Uncle Tom's Children*. This stereotype originates in a minstrel scene where the central character Rice blackened his face and played a role showing poor and futureless black folks to entertain white spectacle (Engle, 1978; Bean *et al.*, 1996). This type of minstrel was well-known in the South as well as in the North of the United States where audiences could see a black man acting as a clown<sup>132</sup>. The stereotype is well played by Griggs in *Black Boy* where he debases himself before a white man to get a penny<sup>133</sup>.

Moreover, it can be mentioned the savage stereotype which Bigger epitomizes. This stereotype consists in viewing Blacks as devoid of any feeling, often instinctive and acting like savages. Their status as savages was favored by scientists who justify their savage nature by the fact that they had "abnormal length of arm, weight of brain, short flat nose, thick protruding lips, exceedingly thick cranium, short black hair, apelike, distinctly wooly, thick epidermis" (Plous, Williams 796). So Blacks were believed to be "mentally inferior, physically and culturally unevolved, and in apelike appearance" (795). The savage attitude is displayed by Bigger as he almost scares his sister to death, violently beats his friend Gus, stifles his white boss Mary into death and crashes down his girl-friend Bessie's head with a brick without apparently any rationally valid reasons.

Within the stereotypical roles that Blacks internalize and act out stand specific stereotypes concerning black women. In fact, in addition to general stereotypes, black women act out stereotypical roles which are related to their status as Blacks in general and black women in particular. During the Jim Crow period, black women used to behave docilely next to their white bosses while they were seen more poignant and severer in their own households. It was

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<sup>132</sup> "In the Middle Age, the minstrel was under the protection of a lord whom he/she had to entertain. He/she used an instrument and sang true or imaginary stories. This entertaining function by domestic servants was found in Southern plantations where slaves had to dance before their masters after their daily work in the farms. So this is how cakewalk was created. At the turn of the 19th century, almost all the towns with a railway station and auditorium were receiving minstrel troops. These entertaining shows were akin to the minstrel tradition." (My translation from Dualé (2017).)

<sup>133</sup> "Originally, the black-faced minstrel was an itinerant clown before being recognized as an artist around 1830. He was accompanied by an orchestra of banjo players (an instrument inspired by the African banya) and sheep bones that is clashed cleverly to mark the rhythm of the songs (*jig-song*). It also takes advantage of the cakewalk, an acrobatic parody of the *quadrille* which is worth a cake to reward the best dancer. The performances were aimed at planters and their families, so the numbers aimed to show the hilarious pictorial art of African manners. Paradoxically, African laconism and fatalism have been transformed into naïve and exuberant gestures, nourished by painful experiences" (Royot *et al.*, 299). By dint of playing with stereotypes and prejudices, the minstrels struck a blow on Blacks' identity and sustainably set up a much caricatured image in the minds. That is exactly what Wright projects in *Black Boy* through Griggs's character who acts like a foolish minstrel actor.

believed that black women loved more their boss's children than their own. Such a behavior was usually referred to as the "mammy stereotype" (Goings 1994) which points to the black woman who is highly respectful of Whites while showing more severity in her own household, which reveals "further evidence of her inferiority to Whites" (Jewell 41-42). Black women who displayed such behaviors were stereotypically referred to as "American apple pie" (41). Nevertheless, one can contend that these black women had no choice and their double behavior was a way of finding a compromise for themselves in a context of interracial deprivation and violence. A deep look into Ella and Granny's characters reveal the mammy stereotype in their behaviors. Granny is a kind and pious woman who gets on well with Whites outside, but once at home, she exerts hellish pressure, even violence sometimes, on her family members including young Richard. We still remember her forbidding Richard to work on Saturdays (*BB*, 158), her violently picking a grudge against Ella for telling Richard short stories that she views as "devil's work" (*BB*, 8), and her violently beating Richard for what she considers as bad language (*BB*, 47). Actually, such family violence is inherited from slavery and has become embedded in Blacks' collective conscience in a way as to become a full part of family education.

Another specific stereotype displayed by dispossessed black women consists in conforming to patriarchal roles such as staying at home to take care of the children or working in white homes as cooks. The stereotype of black women specialized in domestic works, most specifically in cooking, is still commonly accepted. Such a stereotype is assimilated and acted out by black women in Wright's fictional works. Nowhere in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy* can a black woman be seen holding any significant job. Ella fits well into this stereotype, sometimes referred to as "Aunt Jemimah stereotype" designating a black woman specialized in menial works (Goings 1994), as she can be seen championing in working as a cook in white houses where her son Richard smells the delicious meals but cannot get access to them: "My mother often took my brother and me with her to her cooking job [...]. I regretted having come, for my nostrils would be assailed with the scent of food that did not belong to me and which I was forbidden to eat" (*BB*, 36).

In the fictional life of *Black Boy* and that of *Native Son*, the bitter observation can be made that Blacks' really have no choice but to adjust to the stereotypes induced by hostile environment. Granny, Maggie and Ella decide out of survival instinct to adjust to the culture of stereotyping imposed by the ruling class which condemns them to be content with it. Granny specifically finds shelter in the black Adventist Church which further convinces her that the only way to escape from dispossession is not to fight but to rely on strong religious and moral values which will show her worth to her dispossessors and eventually convince them of her



humanity. Granny voluntarily accepts her situation as Jesus Christ accepted his passion while waiting for salvation from God. Not only does she adjust to her dispossessing environment but also tries to exact her subservience on Ella, Aunt Maggie and Richard. Even the latter, who may be praised for his stubbornness against dispossession, is sometimes obliged to adjust to the degrading discourse of dispossessors as illustrated in the library scene:

Now, what were the names of the books written by H.L. Mencken? I did not know any of them. I finally wrote what I thought would be a foolproof note: Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy, I used the word "nigger" to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note, have some books by H.L. Mencken? I forged the white man's name. I entered the library as I had always done when on errands for whites, but I felt that I would somehow slip up and betray myself. I doffed my hat, stood a respectful distance from the desk, looked as unbookish as possible, and waited for the white patrons to be taken care of [...]. As though I did not possess the power of speech, I stepped forward and simply handed her the forged note, not parting my lips. (BB, 270)

In this library scene, although it is Richard who debases himself to get access to documentation, it is the oppressors who oblige Blacks in general to adjust to dehumanizing treatment, a situation we are made to understand through Walden's analysis: "In Chicago he learned that perhaps even a kick was better than uncertainty. Having now embraced anxiety, tension and disquiet, he understood those blacks who had said to the white tormentors 'kick me and be well at home, let me have peace'" (Walden 42). Simply put, Walden implies the sole condition to live peacefully in the hostile environment is to accept or adjust to the stereotypical and condescending attitudes of the dominant social group. Walden's remark is projected in *Uncle Tom's Children* as black girls silently adjust to humiliating treatment:

One night, just as I was about to go home, I met one of the Negro maids. She lived in my direction, and we fell in to the walk part of the way home together. As we passed the white night-watchman, he slapped the maid on her buttock. I turned around, amazed. The watchman looked at me with a long, hard, fixed-under stare. Suddenly he pulled his gun [...]. The maids, the hall-boys, and the bell-boys were all smiles. They had to be. (UTC, 12-13).

For sure, the black maids, hall-boys, and bell-boys do not adjust to such humiliating incidents wholeheartedly. On the contrary, they do it because any hostile-looking attitude is likely to be harshly dealt with as Richard is threatened with a gun following his disapproving attitude towards the watchman who views him as an inferior being.

In the popular imaginary of the dominant class, black subjects are commonly viewed as inferior beings and treated as boys irrespective of their age. The people who are oppressed and dispossessed of social, moral and political equalities are also made to take dispossession for granted because it is present in their everyday lives as a cultural pattern. Galtung considers the

presence of this culture is yet a cultural violence which justifies dispossession and adjustment to it, because it has worked itself into the center of mainstream cultural practices:

[There are] those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence, exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics), that can be used to justify or legitimize structural violence [...]. The culture preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or into seeing them at all. (Galtung 191, 195)

Considering Galtung's comment, it can be deduced that if religion, language, art, and science are used to legitimize and justify structural violence, dispossession has also become a structural violence used against minor and oppressed groups to keep them out of any significant possession. It is such structural dispossession that makes some of Wright's characters, such as Griggs in *Black Boy*, Silas's wife in *Uncle Tom's Children*, and Bigger in *Native Son*, abide by the oppressive system of dispossession.

While oppressed people were born in a land to which they have no rights, they can be considered colonized and to survive in such a colonized land, they have to adjust to the stereotypical values that colonizers impose on them. Yet by dint of adjusting, they end up developing what Ngugi Wa Thiongo calls a colonized spirit. "Once the mind has been colonized, the colonizers do not need to be physically present to inculcate colonial values, naturally the colonized allocate themselves an inferior race" (Wa Thiongo in Makombe 195). Wright's intention to highlight this colonized spirit is evident in *Uncle Tom's Children* where Ella always threatens Richard never to fight again with white boys:

She grabbed a barrel stave, dragged, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two. She would smack my rump with the stave, and, while the skin was still smarting, impart to me gems of Jim Crow wisdom. I was never, never, under any condition, to fight white folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle. (*UTC*, 4-5)

It becomes clear that Ella teaches her son blind adjustment to white oppression in any condition without responding, even one is in self-defense as is the case with Richard. So "Richard is made inferior not simply to the colonizer" but also to "other folks in the family" (Makombe 295). Analyzing other adjustment scenes, such as the one where Granny slaps Richard for interrupting elders' conversation (*BB*, 47), Makombe contends "it is probable that Granny [...] is a vehicle of the culture of silence and fear that is endemic in Jim Crow, the same culture which limits Bigger Thomas's world in *Native Son*" (295). Ella's and Granny's attitudes towards Richard simply correspond to what Spivak (2006) theorized as structural domination, that is domination

which is embodied in official as well as family institutions and this structural domination is boosted by assimilationist policies implemented by the dominant social group.

Assimilation is the daughter of cultural dispossession since, to use Walden's idea, it forces characters to adopt and share the very culture that condemns them. That is why when Richard asks his mother questions on the racial issue, she, overwhelmed by her assimilationist mind of silence and fear, either refuses to answer or provides fallacious answers. In one scene where a white man whips a black boy, Richard asks his mother: "Then why did the white man whip the black boy?" "The white man did not whip the black boy" (*BB*, 31), she replies. Instead of admitting the obviousness of the white man's having beaten the black boy, Ella prefers burying her head in the sand, because oppression has already been taken for granted. From this point of view, Richard's mother can be viewed as one of the epitomes of dispossessed people's assimilationist mind, because she just conforms to the world the way it is without any rational reason.

Assimilationist policies are used to consolidate cultural dispossession as culturally-dispossessed people are made to deny their own identity and to accept their dispossession at individual and community levels (Quayle 207). Communities' assimilation is manifested in the fact that they cannot teach their own culture and, as a result, they cannot understand each other and have to adjust to white cultural hegemony, which impacts on their very social fabric (232), a fragmented social fabric which is manifested through social and cultural barrenness that Wright depicts at length in *Black Boy*:

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions [...]. I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure [...]. Whenever I thought of the bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. (*BB*, 45)

White hegemony has become so inherent that Blacks act out the white ideology of blackness without their presence. Wright uses the stereotype "fool" and "boy" to fathom out the way some Blacks are penetrated by the white ideology of blackness in such a way that they do their best to comply with Whites' stereotypical view of them as subhuman (Quayle 86). For instance, Bigger acts as a meek boy, consolidating the stereotypes of Whites such as Mrs. Dalton who thinks she knows Bigger while her knowledge is not based on him as an individual with specific

subjectivity. Her knowledge of Bigger is rather informed by a stereotypical vision she has of him as being happy with his situation.

By pretending false subservience to white authority, Bigger simply assimilates and perpetuates white stereotypes (Maaloum 99). By the same token, Richard lacks in family nurture permitting him to grow as an individual. On the contrary, his family members want to exact on him the black mask prescribed to them by Whites. Many Blacks wear the mask or blackface contributing to strengthen white stereotypes, as Maaloum asserts, and when they are tired of wearing the mask, they sometimes throw it away and find shelter in fleeing to other areas considered as less hostile. It is clear that assimilation and adjustment to dispossession impact on the psycho-social stability of all of Wright's characters. That is why Wright made use of his naturalistic language not only to depict dispossession but also to campaign for non-conformism which he saw as a solution to it.

## CHAPTER VI: WRIGHT'S LANGUAGE OF DISPOSSESSION AND NON-CONFORMISM

There are various options to fight against dispossession. Wright chose writing to achieve his objective to shake the discriminatory social, cultural, economic and political structures of his time. His use of writing is not surprising if we consider his very name, and its pronunciation (Wright/Write). Wright bore in his own name the power of words. By appropriating language and adapting it to his purpose, he shaped a powerful tool. In other words, to Wright, the denunciation of the black community's plight went through wri(gh)ting against dispossession in a straightforward and shocking manner in order to fight for emancipation and also to show how deprived characters could regain possession and their sense of self. The wrightean/writing process made of Wright a wordsmith and the wri(gh)ter of dispossession.

Therefore, based on Wright's approach, this chapter will show the different wri(gh)ting/wrightean processes at stake to denounce the situation of dominated Black Americans with the objective of destabilizing the dominant group's overwhelming position. Such a denunciation allowed Wright to offer some sense of re-possession to his characters and to dispossessed minorities at large. His strategy of using language to combat dispossession raised, however, an issue that placed him in a quandary with his social environment. As a matter of fact, while his family members and his own community built their lives on moralism, Wright advocated for responsible humanism to repossess one's personal self. His position triggered tensions between himself and his community. In this respect, the second step of this analysis will expose the permanent conflicts which broke out between Wright's humanism and his community's moralism. How were these conflicts projected in the three novels? What form of humanism did Wright advocate and why was it rejected by his community? Why did Wright's characters, in their quest for stability, generate violence? These questions will be answered to show that violence basically stems not only from tensions between moralism and humanism but also from the process of recovering stability and self. Thus, this chapter will end by looking into the use of violence as a wrightean legitimate alternative and a weapon enabling his characters to recover stability and a sense of self.

## 1. Wri(gh)ting: A Non-Conformist Tool against Dispossession

“Words as an inexhaustible source of images and meanings, such is precisely the other path offered to the reader”<sup>134</sup> (Bouzonviller 33) by Wright. Indeed, Wright uses language in several ways to combat and break out of dispossession. Since any frontal attempt against those who dispossess leads to unprecedented violence, the marginalized characters have no means of defense or offense but language, the only tool they possess and control, to express their dismay at their oppressors. In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, for example, language is used as a weapon against oppressors and the Blacks who invariably submit to the conditions of oppression (Melvin 18). Wright’s capacity to use language as images to call to the readers’ senses is obvious in the three books. According to Melvin (1979), by doing so, readers do not have the impression of reading; they feel as though they can see, hear, touch and feel what is really happening in the characters’ lives. Throughout the novels, images are used both literally and figuratively to move the readers’ senses. In this respect, Wright did not write his language; he rather carved it so that his readers can not only mentally grasp the scope of the wrightean language but they can also feel it. In *Black Boy*, Wright mastered all the contours and implications of language as Jennifer Poulos comments:

[Wright] understands that language is not a simple communication tool and acts with full awareness of the political uses of labeling language “good” or “bad”. To compose *Black Boy*, [...] Wright needed language to express himself but in acquiring these skills, he risks becoming “bad” by definition of African-American and white cultures. To become the artist, he wanted to be, Richard Wright had to overcome the badness ascribed to his expression because he was African-American and avoided complicity with western ideas of “good literature.” He needed to turn the “good” and “bad” language into “bad” in the African-American sense. Richard Wright accomplishes this negotiation by linking literal “bad” language, dirty words, obscenities, curses, with ideas of inappropriate speech as defined by a racist society. He plays these notions off each other of “good” and “bad” language. (Poulos 55)

Wright did not use language anyhow, and not in accordance with what oppressive society and the literary canon defined as good language. He deconstructed the notion of good and bad language and redefined these notions according to the goal he wanted to achieve, by re-appropriating the canon and repossessing language. In some cases, as in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, language is often in the form of imagery to engage the reader’s senses and to inform them about the real suffering of the oppressed. This linguistic technique is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s

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<sup>134</sup> « Les mots, comme source intarissable d’images et de sens, telle est précisément l’autre piste offerte au lecteur [...] »

when he declared in the foreword to *The Nigger of The Narcissus* (1897) that “All art, therefore, appeals primarily to senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its highest desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions.” (Conrad, 1897). In this respect, for Conrad the task he was trying to achieve by the power of the written word, [was] to make [readers] hear, to make [them] feel it [was], before all, to make [them] see” (Conrad, 1897). The phrase is so written: “to make you feel and see.” Simply put and in line with Conrad’s perception, literary language must offer the reader a mirror through which he/she can see and feel the events depicted in the novel. Intertextuality is present again, as Wright’s language in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* appeals to emotions and senses, just like Conrad’s. As a matter of fact, both writers showed the same interest in language and worked on it to reach the same goals.

In his works, Wright as a narrator did not intervene much with his own interpretation of the facts, so that the reader perceives the sufferings of dispossessed characters on his own (Melvin 18-19). Melvin aptly sums up Wright’s language strategy to educate readers against oppression:

First, consider *sound*. In ‘Fire and Cloud,’ because we hear the repeated ‘wick!’ of the beating, we hardly need to be told that ‘the wick lashed across his bare back.’ Next, *touch*. In ‘Big Boy Leaves Home,’ we race, with the protagonist, down the railroad track ‘towards the sunset,’ aware of the added physical discomfort which makes the boy’s desperate plight all the more compelling [...]. And finally, *sight*. In ‘Bright and Morning Star,’ we watch the sheriff and his men in the clearing as they lift Johnny-Boy and lay him down on his face and stomach: ‘His kneecap rested on the sheer top of the log’s back and the toes and his shoes pointed ground-ward.’ Readers respond as much as his mother does: ‘So absorbed was she in watching that she felt that it was she who was being lifted and made ready for torture.’ (18)

Melvin’s analysis points to the interesting fact that Wright could use language with so impactful an imagery that the reader feels empathy toward the tortured dispossessed, which can sensitize him/her against the inhuman practices that the dispossessed individuals go through in their fight for material and self-possession. The language used by Wright actually obliges the reader to nourish contempt against oppression. However, it was not enough for Wright to use colorful language in his fight against oppression. Wright even went further by having some of his characters use an offensive language.

In Wright’s works in general, and in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy* in particular, offensive language is used as a weapon by both the dispossessed characters and their dispossessors. However, in order to use language as an effective weapon, one must first acquire the necessary language skills. In the context of dispossession, however, the

acquisition of these skills poses a real threat to the dominant group, which stops and forbids any attempts to learn and use language since the oppressed group is supposed to remain ignorant and dispossessed of language. For example, acquiring good English skills is viewed as bad by the dominant group because it can be used to disrupt the social status quo (Poulos 55). In her article entitled “Shouting Curses: The Politics of Bad Language in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*,” Jennifer Poulos explains the context in which the notion of “bad” language is used. For her, the term has a two tier-definition because it seems that only what Richard says is considered bad and yet Whites also use the same so-called “bad” language to get their messages across. She summons one *Black Boy* scene where Richard is surprised to see white people make use of indiscriminate and inappropriate curses in their meal time:

‘What the hell!’ He snarled. ‘Every morning it’s these damn eggs for breakfast.’  
‘Listen, you sonofabitch,’ the woman said, sitting too, ‘you don’t have to eat ‘em.’  
‘You might try serving some dirt,’ he said, and forked up the bacon.  
I felt I was dreaming. Were they like that all the time? [...]  
A young girl came and flopped into her chair.  
‘That’s right, you bitch,’ the young man said. ‘Knock the food right out of my goddamn mouth.’ (*BB*, 175)

Richard seems to be dumbfounded by the use of such words by Whites. Yet, when he uses the same language in his environment, he meets negative reactions, which means that language is not necessarily “bad” with regard to its meaning but to the social milieu in which it is used. Those who have nothing fear those who master and use language like Richard in *Black Boy* who makes of the defensive and offensive use of language his favorite sport. Besides, Richard’s family is not entirely wrong to fear him when he displays his language skills, as his mastering and use of both languages begin in his own family before showing up outside.

The premises of Richard’s ability to use language to defend himself against all forms of family dispossession is first seen in the kitten scene. While his father forbids him to speak in his presence, a cat makes noise instead of Richard. His father orders him to “Kill that goddamn thing!” (*BB*, 17). It is done! Richard’s father has just opened a breach which allows him to manipulate his angry words to protest against his lack of domestic freedom of speech. Richard himself explains how he proceeds:

He has said to kill the kitten and I would kill it! I knew that he had not really meant for me to kill the kitten, but my deep hate of him urged me toward a literal acceptance of his word.  
‘He said for us to kill the kitten,’ I told my brother.  
‘He didn’t mean it,’ my brother said.  
‘He did, and I’m going to kill ‘im.’ [...].



'He didn't really say kill 'im,' my brother protested [...].  
'I killed 'im,' I whispered [...].  
'He didn't mean for you to kill 'im,' my brother said.  
'Then why did he tell me to do it?' I demanded.  
My brother could not answer, he stared fearfully at the dangling kitten [...].  
I waited, resolving to defend myself with my father's rash words, anticipating my enjoyment in repeating them to him even though I knew that he had spoken them in anger. (*BB*, 17-18)

Richard uses his father's words literally to defeat him. One can see the linguistic battle which takes place between Richard and his brother Léon but the former takes the upper hand as the latter finally cannot answer. The rest of the scene further reveals that Richard's father is overwhelmed in such a way that he cannot punish his son. Ella punishes Richard by making him bury the kitten in the darkness but this punishment, notwithstanding, Richard has won his linguistic battle against his father and has recovered his domestic freedom to have fun. Richard's linguistic strategy is the politics of bad language as Poulos defines it:

'Bad' language can be good, the obscenity of an African-American expressing him/herself also frees African-Americans from the stereotypes imposed on them by an oppressive white culture [...]. 'Bad' means 'good,' and originates from the terminology of the poorest Black Americans, either as simple irony or based on the assumption that what is bad in the eyes of the white establishment is good for them [...]. The African-American community understands that language is not a simple communication tool and acts with full awareness of the political uses of labeling language 'good' or 'bad.' (Poulos 54)

Bad language, or to play with the phonetic similarity, "not (w)right language", is the language which does not conform to the usual courtesy and to the norm but which is at the core of Wright's strategy. It is the language that is viewed by the dispossessors as the one capable of contesting their authority or making them feel remorse or regret. Bad language crucially shaped Wright as a protest artist as he acquired good English skills and constantly used awareness-raising language which was viewed as bad or non-conformist by the dominant group (56). Even Richard's family members pick a grudge against him in *Black Boy* because of his ability to manipulate language in a way to trouble his immediate environment. Obviously, non-conformist characters like Richard would not understand why the use of language as self-expression is prohibited by their community whereas it permits to challenge dispossession. Nevertheless, Richard remains happy to be able to use language and create a terrific impact as the washing scene reveals. In this scene, while Granny is washing him, Richard tells her to kiss his ass when she is through: "When you finish, kiss back there, [he] said" (*BB*, 49), which results in his being severely beaten. This scene enables Richard to discover the power of language. It tells him that it is not only about physical strength. Through language, even the

weakest individual can strike a hard blow on so-called stronger people as is the case with Granny. The scene further shows that following Richard's obscene words, Granny remains "terribly still, her white face was frozen, her black, deep-set eyes blazing" (*BB*, 49-50), before being able to react. From then on, although he claims not to understand the full scope of his words, he becomes aware of the impact his words can have on people, which strengthens his crave for mastering language to use it as a weapon against his oppressors. This scene mirrors Wright's exceeding the boundaries of language imposed on him to show it can be used to express one's individuality and, indeed, through language, Wright marked himself off as part of a black literary tradition of protest with words through literary writing (Poulos 61).

Literature is the place par excellence to manipulate words in a way to defend one's ideals and Wright demonstrated it through the three novels, particularly in *Native Son* where Max makes use of linguistic abilities to defend Bigger in court. It is through language that the stakeholders of Bigger's criminal affair lock horns before the tribunal in *Native Son*, which testifies of the importance of words in everyday life. Max, however, uses non-conformist words based on communist ideals which sweep away the values of the mainstream oppressive liberal culture. Contrary to Richard who sometimes uses language in *Black Boy* to offend his family and people around him, Max uses language to defend Bigger against the whole biased judicial system. Language permits to understand Bigger is a mentally and emotionally dispossessed young boy. Language also allows Max to plead in his favor by exposing and translating attenuating circumstances, as his introductory plea evidences:

The laws of this state allow the offering of evidence in mitigation of punishment, and shall I request, at such time as the Court deems the best, that I be given opportunity to offer evidence as to the mental and emotional attitude of this boy, to show the degree of responsibility he had in these crimes. Also, I want to offer evidence as to the youth of this boy. Further I want to prevail upon this Court to consider this boy's plea of guilty as evidence mitigating his punishment. (*NS*, 290)

As one can understand, Max does not use language to deny Bigger's guilt in Mary's murder but he endeavors through rhetoric reasoning to expose Bigger's decaying life in a way to make the whole court understand all the transcendental events which ushered him into crime. Although Max cannot finally prevent Bigger from being sentenced to death, his linguistic skills permit him to raise emotions and move the reader who cannot but react against the dispossessing environment conveyed through press fake news, racial hatred and shameless political propaganda (Kinnamon, 1993). Reverend Taylor also makes use of linguistic skills in *Uncle*

*Tom's Children* to protest against local authorities wanting to keep food-dispossessed people from demonstrating, and his argument can be put on a par with Max's:

'Yessuh, Whut yuh white folks say is right. N Ah ergrees wid yuh. But Ah ain foolin wid nobody thas tryin t stir up race hate; naw, suh! Ah ain never done nothing like that n Ah never will, so hep me Gawd! Now, erbout this demonstration: Yessuh, Ah heard erbout it. Thus all everybodys been talking erbout erroun here fer a week, yo Honah. Waal, suh, Ahll tell yuh. Theys jus hungry. Theys marchin cause they don know whut else t do, n thas the truth from here t Heaven! Mistah Mayor, theys hongry! Jus plain hongry!' (*UTC*, 150)

Here too, language is used in genuinely African American vernacular to lay out the deep concerns lying for characters like Bigger, and dispossessed people by extension. They are all locked in the social and economic maze where only demonstrating (hungry people's case in *Uncle Tom's Children*), stealing (Richard's situation in *Black Boy*), or crime (Bigger in *Native Son*) can help them out.

Nevertheless, Wright is not an absolutist thinker. In other words, he does not believe in the almightiness of language as it does not permit to save Bigger from death sentence, nor does it keep Richard (in *Black Boy*) being beaten, and Silas being killed. Richard's case is particularly significant in that it really reveals Wright's reservations on the power of language and his belief in its liberating potential. Although "the word becomes the sword to rebel against the oppressive social system" (Smith 132), Richard recognizes that the use of language can sometimes result in further dispossession. For example, while he is proud of championing in manipulating language, he fails to escape from Peace and Reynolds' scheme to prevent him from acquiring professional skills in the optical shop<sup>135</sup> (*BB*, 209). The only thing Richard can do in such circumstances is to go back to the street and, together with his comrades, to use all their linguistic anger to insult and curse and theoretically rebel against their dispossessors as one street scene evidences:

The first white sonofabitch that bothers me is gonna get a hole knocked in his head!  
Naïve rebellion [...]  
'Whenever I see one I spit. Emotional rejection of whites.  
Man, what makes white folks so mean? Increased emotional rejection [...].  
'Man, ain't they ugly?' [...]  
But my ma says white folks smell like dead folks. Wishing the enemy was dead. (*BB*, 90-91)

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<sup>135</sup> The trap Peace and Reynolds set for Richard consists in accusing him of calling one of them without adding "Sir". Richard finds himself in a quandary, because if he denies, it will mean that he is taking them for liars. But if he admits having called them without adding "Sir", it means a significant break of racial taboo which requires Blacks to always call Whites "Sir". In spite of Richard's mastery of language, he is not able to escape from the trap and finally resolves to balk at working in the optical shop, which signals the victory of his white adversaries.

In this scene, the street serves as a springboard for the oppressed to gather and voice their contempt and rebellion against the oppressive system and its perpetrators. The language used here is particularly violent and quite disrespectful, not to say unconventional. Even Reverend Taylor who fails to convince the white mob to spare him physical violence ends up using unconventional language wishing “the good God will clear up [the dispossessors’] world some day (*UTC*, 131). One may be tempted to wonder where Wright’s characters acquire all these linguistic skills to speak against their environment. As far as Richard is concerned, his secret lies in reading.

Richard’s rebellion is compounded of reading writers who could be described as revolutionaries. These writers advocate for a total overhaul of society to conform it to universal human values such as the acceptance of others as human beings without distinction of race or social status. One of the first writers Richard reads is Henry Louis Mencken, a white non-conformist who was insulted because he usually behaved like “a ranging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority”<sup>136</sup> (*BB*, 121-172). Richard discovers that Mencken castigates American society and marvels in Mencken’s writing style just as Wright did. Reading books like Henry Mencken’s and Sinclair Lewis’s opens Richard’s eyes to understanding Whites’ manners and to sometimes laugh at them. The reader is made to perceive it clearly through Richard’s account: “My first serious novel was Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*. It made me see my boss, Mr. Gerald, and identify him as an American type. I would smile when I saw him lugging his golf bags into the office” (*BB*, 273). Reading has broken the white man’s myth for Richard to such an extent that, considering his own words, he becomes a reading addict:

I gave myself over to each novel without reserve, without trying to criticize it; it was enough for me to see and feel something different. And for me, everything was something different. Reading was like a drug, a dope. The novels created moods in which I lived for days. But I could not conquer my senses of guilt, my feeling that white men around me knew that I was changing, that I had begun to regard them differently” (*BB*, 273).

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<sup>136</sup> Mencken was an individualist and against the American democratic system which was self-contradictory. While the Constitution solemnly proclaimed that all men were created equal and endowed with unalienable rights by the Creator, minorities were still largely discriminated and oppressed as opposed to European countries where freedom and democracy were much more rooted. That is certainly why he denounced everything American while extolling everything European. Mencken’s vision fits with Richard who also advocates for the full integration of black minorities into American democracy. Therefore, Wright’s ideological and linguistic closeness with Mencken was the result of natural attraction.

Richard's testimony is clear. Reading enables him to discover white secrets, which makes him more conscious and more irritated about the racial situation (*BB*, 274). It is the reading of revolutionary novels such as Sinclair Lewis's that makes him critical about black art which, for him, does not seriously address their fundamental problems (*BB*, 275). Once Richard discovers the power of language in reading, no one, not even his family members, can keep him from devouring novels. Richard's hunger for novels is Wright's projection of his own crave. Wright's hunger was multifaceted and notwithstanding his grandmother's reluctance, he craved for reading which already foreshadowed his early position and stance, as the scene describing Granny ordering her daughter Ella to stop reading *Bluebeard and His Seven Wives* to her little boy shows (*BB*, 47). Wright himself indulged in reading against all odds and became aware that learning to read and write was a political weapon which enabled him to challenge Jim Crow laws (Melching 289). In a related vein, Butler suggests that reading moves Richard out of stasis into open worlds of imagination and possibilities and unlocks his consciousness (Butler 12). Makombe also concludes that while Wright did not believe in the possibility of liberation through language in *Native Son*, it became possible to him in *Black Boy* through the description of non-conformist acts such as reading and writing (Makombe 294). Despite the consequences of his reading, Richard is determined to read and reading certainly inspires his challenging the principal's willingness to write his own valedictorian speech for him (*BB*, 193-197), and his future writing against oppressive ideologies. This can be linked with Wright's own intentions to speak and write for himself rather than letting other people do it for him.

Wright's social environment, and that of his characters, were replete with oppressive ideologies which relegated dispossessed subjects to the status of sub-humans. Wright's pen swept away oppressive ideologies through non-conformist writing or what can be termed "writing against the grain." Writing against the grain should be understood as a strategy which does not abide by established literary norms and principles. Wright's writing-against-the-grain position became clearer in his interview with *L'Express* in 1960. While he was asked to conform to standard writing by avoiding having any fixation on Black American experience, he countered: "On the contrary, take your ghetto experience as your subject, because it is a universal subject, and if people criticize you, never mind"<sup>137</sup> (Wright in *L'Express*). Wright suggested black writers had to consider their own experience to write. To him, they had to let their experience dictate what to write. He viewed this position as a solution to do away with social anxiety and solitude to take more into account the public and private environment. In a

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<sup>137</sup> « Bien au contraire, prenez pour sujet votre expérience de la vie en ghetto, car c'est là précisément un sujet universel, et si l'on vous critique, laissez faire. »

related vein, Derrida (1967) states, “Writing is the anguish of the Hebrew *ruah* experienced on the side of loneliness and human responsibility, on the side of Jeremiah submitted to the dictation of God: ‘Take a book and you will write in it all that I told you’”<sup>138</sup> (19). Wright expressed his solitude through writing as though there was a supernatural force dictating him what he had to write, much like God dictating to Jeremiah what he had to write. But how did Wright combat oppressive ideologies in writing? It is certainly through addressing a specific audience in a way to make it negate the reproduction of oppressive relations (Wilhite 106).

If the writer misses the appropriate language or does not use the (w)right words, he misses his targeted readership and the objective of putting an end to oppressive ideologies. Wright himself recognized he committed such a mistake while writing *Uncle Tom’s Children* and promised to write another book that readers would weep over without the consolation of tears:

I had written a book of short stories which was published under the title of *Uncle Tom’s Children*. When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest. (NS 354)

From then on, one can remark that Wright used language very poignantly to come to terms with every aspect of dispossession which had become inherent in the American society he was living in. Although using provocative language made him more distant instead of getting closer to his kinsmen, Wright refused to be corrupted to accept these traditional roles (Wilhite 115). This refusal is transparent in *Black Boy* where Richard challenges his principal and delivers his own valedictorian speech, an attitude which is certainly induced by the undeniable fact that writing has shown him the path to self-awareness and individuality. Whether in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, Wright highlights the importance of language by creating protagonists who grow from inarticulateness to articulateness, which helps them find answers to their own existential questions (Thaddeus, 1985). Bigger’s case mirrors Thaddeus’s notions of “articulateness” and “inarticulateness.” At the beginning of the novel, Bigger is really a timid boy once he enters the dominant world and corresponds to the typical inarticulate individual.

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<sup>138</sup> « L’écriture est l’angoisse de la *ruah* hébraïque éprouvée du côté de la solitude et de la responsabilité humaine, du côté de Jérémie soumis à la dictée de Dieu : « Prends un livre et tu y écriras toutes les paroles que je t’ai dites. »

However, Derrida warns us against always considering silence as timidity. For Derrida (1967), individuals can be silent because,

[They] experience a need to speak which escapes the objectivist project of classical reason, a need to speak even at the cost of a declared war of the language of reason against itself, a war in which language would recover, destroy itself or constantly restart the gesture of its own destruction. [...] Silence is not a last resort but a different project, and perhaps a more ambitious one<sup>139</sup>. (59-60)

From a Derridean point of view, Bigger's silence during the trial is highly meaningful. Actually, he is silent because the language of reason cannot express what he feels about his social situation. "He is confronted and defied by the inexplicable array of his own emotions [...] his own incommunicable life" (NS, 330). The impossibility of language is replaced by his clumsiness and not even being capable of raising his eyelashes during his job interview at the Daltons. However, as Derrida asserts above, silence can hide a more ambitious project and, indeed, Bigger's subconscious project is to kill Mr. Dalton's daughter, which will make it possible for the language of his reason to manipulate Bessie, his girlfriend, Mrs. Thomas, the Daltons, Jan Erlone and even the police. Once he can use the language of reason, Bigger reaches articulateness and is able to speak out to explain to Max, his lawyer, the reason why he killed.

To make his character achieve articulateness, Wright gave himself appropriate means and no one could stop him on his path. Neither beatings, insults, name-calling, nor the threats of a failing society could convince Wright to balk at his quest for articulateness through literary language which had become a passion for him. Wright conveyed his raceless ideology to the great displeasure of Ralph Ellison who contended fiction had to be assessed based on aesthetics, not on any ideological considerations (In Alzoubi 1). It is true that Wright did not totally discard aesthetic elements in his writing, but ideology was paid more attention because his objectives were to change society and there were no better weapons than ideology to do so. After being inspired by the Marxist ideological language to write *Uncle Tom's Children* and to a lesser extent *Native Son*, Wright broke free from this ideology in *Black Boy* and announced the premises of his existentialism which materialized in the writing of *The Outsider*. Existentialist language enabled Wright to single himself out as an oppressed individual in an oppressive society and to find individual and personal strategies to resist social marginalization.

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<sup>139</sup> « Il éprouve une nécessité de parler qui échappe au projet objectiviste de la raison classique, nécessité de parler fut-ce au prix d'une guerre déclarée du langage de la raison contre lui-même, guerre où le langage se reprendrait, se détruirait ou recommencerait sans cesse le geste de sa propre destruction. [...] Le silence n'est pas un pis-aller mais un projet différent, et peut-être plus ambitieux. »

While the dominant group defined margins and boundaries to the detriment of the dispossessed for the benefit of its members, Wright deconstructed and reconstructed new centers for the benefit of everyone regardless of their social position. This literary strategy goes in line with Demirtürk's analysis suggesting that Wright's autobiographical language was used to situate the author's personal preferences in a broad socio-political context. In other words, autobiographical language was used to resist stereotypes and misconceptions by penetrating the social discourse Wright had always been excluded from (Demirtürk 69-70). As with Bigger in *Native Son*, Wright used naturalistic language to create his own world to portray his life objectively so as to symbolize the life of the dispossessed as a whole. By so doing, Wright proved to his community that self-creation was still possible even when one is cast out of society. In a related vein, Yoshinobu Hakutani maintains that because Wright was not welcome in the world he lived in, he created his own, which is corroborated by Richard in *Black Boy*: "I caught a sense of the world that was mine and mine alone, a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering" (*BB*, 87- 88). The meaning Richard wrought out of meaningless life enables him to resist every force driving him back into meaninglessness, just as Wright himself did.

When embracing the creative process to come to terms with dispossession, disruptive forces always stand on the way to prevent from achieving one's goal. This situation is well mirrored in one *Black Boy* scene where a woman tries to convince Richard that, as a "Negro," he will never become a writer, which assaults his *ego* and leads him to rebellion. Sidonie Ann Smith explains the woman's stance by the fact that there were intellectual taboos imposed on Blacks and by wanting to write like Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, Richard is logically seen as a rebel (Smith 134). Notwithstanding these taboos, Wright "use[d] the pen as weapon, the word as ammunition for protesting against the life of the Black American. The pen bec[a]me the most effective weapon of warfare" (134). Wright's weapon was not only targeting whites' misconceptions of the Other but also Blacks' social and cultural flaws, which further testifies his transracial or raceless view of society. Although such a conception earned Wright troubles with Whites and Blacks, his literary battle corresponds to Johnson's analysis of art as a struggling weapon.

Wright could have escaped from the pressures of his living environment had he embraced the literary classicism of his period based on canonic art for art's sake. However, because Wright did not create art to entertain the mind and make people forget their sorrows, he did not write to represent the world but to change it as in protest art which lives up to



forgetfulness (Smethhurst 38; Britt 2). Writing was a weapon to Wright, a weapon not used to please people but rather to defend himself against potential attackers. To this end, Johnson's analysis of the function of art in the African American context is convincing:

Literary creation is certainly dependent of the writer's talent and temperament, but it is also and above all dependent of the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic conditions in which the writer lives, hence the evocation of identity affirmation because it registers the social contradictions which show it is singular and departs from the prevailing cultural or social norm<sup>140</sup>. (Johnson 286)

For Johnson, literary creation depends on the socio-economic and political context and, therefore, Blacks could not engage in art for the sake of art if they wanted to break free from the chains of oppression. This analysis can be carried further to suggest that dispossessed minorities cannot venture into conventional art if they want to recover their lost possession. The act of writing is important for minor groups because it reflects socio-cultural realities and helps in "identity affirmation and the purification of society" (Johnson 286). To Deleuze and Guattari, this is the objective of minor literature: "Minor literature works to produce a reading which constitutes its own affirmation. [...] The primary characteristic of a minor literature involves all the ways in which the language is effected by a strong co-efficient of de-territorialization" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1983, 14, 16). In line with Deleuze and Guattari, the literary work should play as a referee of the social game and, thus, prevents the major group from crushing down the minor one. We can also agree with Johnson that Wright's literature fits into this logic, because the American constitution guarantees the equality of individuals and the possibility of well-being, but citizens were not in fact treated on an equal footing (Johnson 293) and were even less considered equal during Wright's time. In such circumstances, even though those who belong to the minor group are viewed by the dominant group as immoral, the minor group can defend its unconventional acts with humanistic reasons, which results in conflicts and tensions between moralism and humanism.

## **2. Tensions between Moralism and Humanism**

Before any analysis of the palpable tensions between moralism and humanism in Wright's three works, it is important to clarify these two concepts in order to avoid any

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<sup>140</sup> « La création littéraire est certes fonction du talent et du tempérament de l'écrivain mais elle est aussi et surtout fonction des conditions socio-culturelles, socio-politiques, socio-économiques dans lesquelles évolue l'écrivain, d'où l'évocation d'affirmation de l'identité parce qu'elle enregistre les contradictions sociales qui montrent qu'elle est singulière et s'écarte de la norme culturelle ou sociale en vigueur dans la société. »

ambiguity. Moralism is a tendency to moralize others or to impose it on them. In “On Moralism” (2008), Robert K. Fullinwider defines it as, “the habit of uncharitably and officiously passing judgment on other people, typically in spoken or written public form” (Fullinwider in Coady 251). Craig Taylor goes further and contends that “the nature of moralism is not to judge [...] but to condemn, labeling, reducing other human beings to [...] caricature [...]. Through caricatures moralists place themselves above human frailty and the messy business of life and its choices” (Taylor in Coady 252). Humanism is basically characterized by its full trust in human capacities to solve every problem without resorting to any supernatural strategies. Man is in the center of everything and is the sole responsible for his actions. Based on Lamont’s *Philosophy and Humanism* (1997), humanism can be summed up in a few recognizable features: All supernatural beings are myths created from human imagination. There is no redemption after death, because death is the end of man. Every problem in human life is solvable through human reason, so man is fully responsible for his destiny. Morality is approached with relativism because people do not have the same appreciations of facts and behaviors, so ethics is better promoted than morality as universal human values. Only social, economic and political programs can improve human living conditions by fostering mutual understanding, peace, democracy and respect for human freedom. Science and reason are the sole bases on which humans should fall back instead of subjective convictions (Lamont, 1997).

Moralism perceived as being the exaggerated use of moral references to influence the behavior of others poses a problem of tolerance. Generally, those who see themselves as a moral reference have a tendency to impose their values on those who do not share them. The latter are often victims of verbal outrages or even physical violence from self-appointed moral references, because they are perceived as dangers to the moral balance of society. In *Black Boy*, Ella and Richard learn this the hard way when Ella suffers the wrath of Granny who strongly blames her for wanting to lead her grandson into moral decadence by telling him stories she considers immoral. “You stop that, you evil gal!” she shouted [at Ella]. I want none of that Devil stuff in my house!” (*BB*, 47). As for Richard, he is perceived as a “little demon, just a foolish child” (*BB*, 47) to be humanized and moralized by instilling in him Adventist moral values. That is why after getting a beating from Granny for asking her to kiss his anus, Richard is totally isolated in his own family. In this specific case, Granny’s moralism consists in seeking to know nothing about the ins and outs of other people’s morality. Worse, she obliges them to comply with her own moral values, which she perceives as superior, and failing to do so results in verbal outrage, corporal punishment, or family isolation. That is why after having pronounced the obscene words, even when Richard confesses “I have not realized the meaning of what I had

said; its moral horror was unfelt by me” (*BB*, 50), he does not escape Granny’s moralistic violence which is a mere epitome of American moralism at large.

The case of the United States illustrates well the risk that moralism poses for those who do not share such a value. Indeed, mainstream morality derived from antebellum Puritanism caused moral intolerance, sometimes conscious or not, against minorities and their moral values which were considered as exotic and inferior. America considered itself a moral reference inspired by God and subscribed to the idea that the preservation of the American nation lay in the formation of identical and common God-given values, as evidenced by the presence of God, and by the supreme reference to morality in the Constitution (Noll, Harlow 33): “Creator, Nature’s God, Supreme Judge, Divine Providence, Author of Existence, Great Governor” (American Constitution 1776). The moral presence of God entailed there could be no possible questioning of these values. In the American subconscious of the first settlers and of the Puritans, whoever wanted to live in the American nation had to accept these values as integral parts of the nation’s legitimacy. This is called “legal moralism” which Patrick Devlin defends as follows:

Whether a man should be allowed to take more than one wife is something about which every society has to make up its mind one way or the other. In England we believe in the Christian idea of marriage and therefore adopt monogamy as a moral principle. Consequently, the Christian institution of marriage has become the basis of family life and so part of the structure of our society. It is not because it is Christian. It has got there because it is Christian, but it remains there because it is built into the house in which we live and could not be relieved without bringing it down [...]. It would be useless for a non-Christian to stage a debate designed to prove that polygamy was theologically more correct and socially more preferable; if he wants to live in the house, he must accept it as built in the way it is. (Devlin 73)

It is true that we are not dealing with the English case here, but Devlin’s standpoint can be applied to Northern America as a reading grid to understand its moralism and its projection in Wright’s novels. It is interesting to see that Devlin contends English morality is based on Christian values and that they have become so part of the social house that no difference can be brought in without bringing the whole house down.

Devlin’s comment applies to the American context and is well projected by Wright in his novels. For instance, in *Black Boy*, Richard finds Granny’s moralism oppressive and sometimes backward; yet he has to take it for granted or literally leave the house and, indeed, he is finally compelled to leave: “I returned to the station and waited for my train, my eyes watching the crowd. An hour later I was sitting in a Jim Crow coach, speeding northward, making the first lap of my journey to a land where I could live with less fear” (*BB* ,227). It,

therefore, makes sense to suggest that, contrary to humanism, which advocates for moral tolerance and puts every moral value on an equal footing, moralism leads individuals on the path of intolerance and of rejection of their own family members. Thus, Granny's moralistic intransigence makes her children as intolerant as she is. "Under her nurture, her children grow like herself: they tend to be violent, sadistically cruel, emotionally deadened, and unimaginative" (Howland 121). It is simply not possible to live in Granny's house without sharing her moralistic values. This Devlinian view of morality implies that either one loves the house with all its moral structure or leaves it, which Richard Wolheim rejects altogether:

For Devlin, the identity, and the continuity, of a society [...] reside in the common possession of a single morality [while in liberal humanism], it resides [...] in the mutual toleration of different moralities [...]. Because toleration cannot be seen as moral conformity to [...] uniform behavior, [...] those who find liberalism acceptable, must reject the conception of society on which the whole Devlin's argument depends. (Wolheim 38-39)

What Wolheim denounces in moralism is its tendency to exclude all other forms of moral values which are considered not to be part of the structure of the social house, which poses the risk of intolerance and even of violence as Richard experiences in *Black Boy*. In search of values other than those of the American mainstream, Bigger Thomas, too, is sentenced to death by Devlinian legal moralism which does not seek to understand the reasons or the sources of other values coming from outside. Granny's oppressive moralistic habit in *Black Boy* is the epitome of American moralism, as Geir Lunderstad explains: "Americans traditionally see themselves as unique people with a special mission in the world. [...] This idea has been expressed with rather striking force by presidents of different political persuasions" (Lunderstad 527). Steven Lukes counters self-centered and subjective moralism with humanism which he presents as "a thesis of no superiority of moral values, beliefs, principles, codes, system over another and as such no objective ways of resolving their conflicts" (Steven in Chukwuma, Chioma, Uche 7). Subjective moralism is clearly embodied by Reverend Taylor in *Uncle Tom's Children* where, while young people want him to help them fight for their objective humanistic interests, he finds it impossible to do because of his moral responsibility: "Taylor sighed and looked at the floor [...] Lawd, Ah hope Ihm doin right. I don wanna lead these folks wrong. [...] Listen, Brother, Ah done tol yuh Ah cant do tha! [...] Aftah all, Ahma preacher" (*UTC*, 154, 142). Even though Taylor does not convince his audience because of the subjectivity of his reasoning, he continues to perceive his moral values as intrinsic and unquestionable.

One of the major problems with moralism that Wright raised remains its subjectivity and the impossibility of its questioning. In other words, it is unquestionable even when at a certain moment people want change, which sharply contrasts with the humanists' constant quest for innovation and change. Moralism is like a taboo which cannot be justified objectively but which, nevertheless, has managed to be respected in society for many years thanks to the constant pressure of its supporters. The latter always brandish the threat of the sanction of God, the Supreme moral reference, to scare anyone who would try to question prevailing moral values or propose other alternatives. It is this impossibility of questioning that prevents Reverend Taylor from acting for the good of his community. In his position as a religious and moral leader, he remains attached to the moral Establishment, which prevents him from connecting to the pragmatic needs for change of the young people of his community. To put Louis Horowitz's analysis in a nutshell, Taylor is imprisoned in his old world of moral and lawful submission and fails to assimilate new humanistic forces into his world (Horowitz 528). In this regard, Horowitz argues that visibly, "morality holds to law and order while humanism advocates for justice and change" (527). That is why, despite all objective humanistic arguments presented by the young people, Taylor refuses to revise his moralistic doctrine and to face facts. From this point of view, Heta Häyri argues, "because morality is not questionable by the force of argument, it cannot but be refuted as alienating" (Häyri 206), especially when its non-questionability leads to psychological discomfort.

In his humanist approach to society, Wright advocated the responsibility of man for his actions. In clear terms, it is for the person to analyze the act of his/her fellow by objective reasoning without falling into moralistic judgment which makes one feel guilty. Wright was mainly interested in the psychological analysis of certain acts that were considered immoral and condemned by moralistic society. As Eugene Newman defines it,

Psychology [...] may be defined as the field of inquiry whose subject matter is the totality of human cognitive and emotional life, which it attempts, before and independently of any behavioral prescriptions, to describe just as it is, independently of moralistic, mythical, or religious characterization. (Newman 208)

Newman insists psychological analysis should not suffer from any form of moralistic, mythical or religious judgment. Similarly, Wright objectively portrays Bigger's psychology just the way it is without moralistic considerations. Where moralists may be tempted to justify their values as common sense and self-evident, Bigger's characterization shows that the individual, even in a moralistic society, can develop other values and become violent if he/she is not given any objective psychological attention. As evidenced in *Native Son*, while murder remains the most

abject form of immorality, Bigger apparently finds moral and psychological satisfaction after his murder, because the moralistic society has long oppressed his social and psychological well-being. It is not foolish to say Bigger may have even read Nietzsche before committing his murder.

Nietzsche contends that morality oppresses psychological well-being, because it imposes too much restriction on the real will of a person (Nietzsche in Newman 210, 214, 215). Therefore, he advocates for the freedom of any human being to satisfy his/ her real needs even if they are often conflicting with prevailing morality. There can be a truly free and meaningful being only when the power of the will is expressed through the self and not that of morality over the self. From Nietzsche's point of view, this power of the will guides the individual and always brings him/her back on the right path, prepares him/her for the qualities and abilities necessary for his/her march towards wholeness:

Freedom of the will, that is the expression of the complex state of delight of the person exercising volition, who commands and at the same time identifies himself with the executor of the order. [...] In this way, the person exercising volition adds the feelings of delights of his successful executive instruments, the useful under-wills or under-souls, indeed the body is but a social order composed of many souls, to this feeling of delight as a commander. [...] Meanwhile, the organizing idea that is destined to rule keeps going deep down, it begins to command; slowly it leads us back from side roads and back roads; it prepares single qualities and fitness that will one day prove to be indispensable as means toward whole [...] or meaning. (Nietzsche 26-27)

Bigger's and Richard's behaviors in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are typical of the psychological freedom advocated by Nietzsche as they can be seen practicing masturbation and voyeurism to satisfy their psychological well-being to the detriment of their society's moral values. Richard "quietly pulled up a chair, placed a box upon it, and climbed and peered through a crack at the top of the door. [He] saw, in the dim shadow of the room beyond, a naked man on top of the woman" (*BB*, 72). Moralists would condemn Bigger's and Richard's attitudes, but an objective humanistic study of their social environment demonstrates that these acts constitute a psychological well-being alternative to the lack of care perpetrated by society. When Bigger's penis becomes rigid during his masturbation, "his sexuality finds release only in fantasy," because he is "crushed and emasculated right after [his] assertion of [his] sexual potency by the forces of life [he does] very little to grasp" (Maaloum 96). Therefore, instead of condemning any act contrary to what is considered immoral, one should rather seek to understand the reasons underlying these acts. Of course, Wright was not advocating for smug nihilism inspired by Nietzsche, but raised the issue of moralism as its defenders took it for granted. He was just in favor of humanistic responsibility.

Responsibility is what Bigger demonstrates throughout his odyssey in *Native Son*. As he commits two cold murders, ideally his moral wrong should have been recognized, and public apologies made as demanded by his moralistic society. However, Bigger chooses to shoulder his responsibilities without lapsing into moralistic self-judgment. Through the narrative, Wright exposes Bigger's psychology and pushes the reader to adopt a humanistic reading of him. Instead of judging him according to morality, one understands that the oppression of the so-called moral society he lives in led him into this situation and that, just as Mary and Bessie are his victims, he is in turn a victim of the hypocritical moralistic society. As Max voices out, the moralistic society "marked up the earth and said, 'Stay there!'" (NS, 305). However, because "life is not stationary" (NS, 305), Bigger moves into killing. On this point, many of Wright's critics are unanimous not on Bigger's guilt but rather on his responsibility for his crimes. For example, while moralists brandish guilt and condemnation to prevent or deal with immoral acts, Dorothy Redden argues that Wright suggested "accountability will have to serve. [...] Events are viewed as causally linked, without moralistic reference, [...] without imposing them any flavor of righteousness" (Redden 114). Wright did not seek to absolve Bigger of his crime but suggested analyzing it from a humanistic point of view to understand why his character commits them, all of which reveals the self-contradiction and inconsistency of moralism, because it fails to prohibit crime while it is so prompt in condemning it. This is exactly what Grenander explains at length:

For each protagonist, society presents the moral law as a prohibitory wall within which, it claims, he can and must live. Since society claims he can live within it, it also claims that moral life is theoretically possible, i.e., moral law is consistent within itself. Faced with these claims, each protagonist feels trapped, unrealized, and unsatisfied, burdened with the guilt of his own misdeeds and the suffering of others, baffled by contradictions that the moral law does not seem to acknowledge. What he learns through his crimes is that the moral law is neither prohibitory nor consistent. It is not prohibitory since society (or even God can only punish, not prevent; he is therefore free. And since it is not consistent, he learns that he must do more than merely obey: he must continually choose what to do; he is responsible. His crime thus attacks the society's claims of omnipotence and consistency and tells him that he is free and responsible. (Grenander 57)

From a general point of view, for Grenander, Bigger shoulders responsibility for the crime to get an identity that is free from what social morality imposes on him. Wright did not try to justify Bigger by simply attacking moralistic laws. Apparently, whether Bigger is wrong or right, committing a crime was not Wright's concern. His only concern was simply to show how crime enables Bigger to reach an identity of his own and based on his own choice in a highly moralistic society where the two-tier application of moral laws was often the rule.

After the proclamation of independence, one of the Achilles tendons of American moralism lied in its self-contradictory nature. While Americans claimed their “right to the moral leadership of this planet” (Kennedy in Lundestad 527), and that “a nation’s domestic and foreign politics [had to] be derived from the same standards of ethics, honesty and morality” (Carter in Lundestad 527), America remained the land on which, to judge by its own moral criteria, all forms of inhuman and oppressive practices against Blacks lingered on. However, from the oppressor’s point of view, these acts were not perceived as immoral since morality took two shapes, namely one for the dominant group, and another one for the dominated group. In such circumstances, the members of the dominated group “are nothing but merchandise that morality therefore did not prevent from mistreating”<sup>141</sup> (Barroso-Fontanel 68). In other words, the violence of the dominant group was considered as legal and moral while that of the dominated group was viewed as immoral and illegal, and, indeed, a critical look into Wright’s three works corroborates this reality.

In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Silas’s wife is raped in her own house but no moral or judicial condemnation takes place, while Mann’s theft of Heartfield’s boat, to save his pregnant wife, causes him to be lynched. In *Native Son*, Bigger’s accidental murder of Mary provokes first his moral condemnation by Reverend Hammond and then his death sentence by the American justice, while his premeditated crime of Bessie is not mentioned anywhere, except to use her corpse to serve Buckley’s argument in favor of his capital punishment. Similarly, in *Black Boy*, Bob is apprehended and lynched for having sex with a white prostitute, while Hoskins’s crime by white people, who are jealous of his business, is never condemned. These events allow Wright to let the reader perceive the full complexity of American moralism. Even the law, inspired by “divine morality,” was applied according to social belonging. This is what Wright evoked in his interview with *L’Express* in 1960: “In the United States, we fight for a real application of our Constitution. [...] We fight to be integrated into a civilization that we accept. We are not against the West, but we want the effective application of the principles of freedom of the West”<sup>142</sup>. Since the principles of freedom are an integral part of Western humanism, it was thus a heartfelt appeal that Wright launched from France for the triumph of liberating Western humanism over alienating North-American moralism.

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<sup>141</sup> « Les Noirs ne sont rien d’autre qu’une marchandise que la morale n’empêchait donc pas de maltraiter. »

<sup>142</sup> « Aux Etats-Unis, nous combattons pour une mise en application réelle de notre Constitution, ce qui n'est pas le cas des nations africaines ; nous luttons pour être intégrés à une civilisation que nous acceptons. Nous ne sommes pas contre l'Occident, mais nous voulons l'application effective des principes de liberté de l'Occident. »



As American intolerant and oppressive moralism was tough, Wright did not hesitate to pervert it in his fictions to shock society in order to bring about the humanistic change he longed and craved for. This accounts for the fact that all the protagonists of the three works are portrayed by Wright as being what can be called pervasive anti-heroes, that is to say heroes who pervert the values of the traditional hero as a defender of moral and social values, by behaving more like villains. Their behavior highlights Wright's non-conformism to the prevailing socio-moral system and suggests his aspiration for a humanistic society where men are made accountable for their actions and where moralistic hypocritical sympathy and judgments are left aside. In a related vein, Jonathan Elmer argues that "Max repudiates the liberal-humanitarian approach based on sympathy while not combating racism structurally" (Elmer 791). Walden also suggests "Wright denounces northern hypocrisy. Southern Whites hate black skin color and northern Whites hate black though while faking sympathy for the Negro" (Walden 39). For sure, if Wright had got any choice, there is no gainsaying that he would have preferred humanism better than moralism. Because moralism often turns into violence, its victims also indulge in violence as a legitimate alternative to protect themselves and to keep their sense of self at all cost.

### **3. Violence: A Legitimate Alternative to Recovering Stability and a Sense of Self**

Before delving into the analysis of violence as a non-conformist strategy against dispossession, it is important to clarify the notion. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation" (WHO). Violence can be of several types. It can be used to offend or to defend oneself, in case of self-defense, for example. If dispossession is viewed as a form of violence, this violence, when it manifests itself, can be understood as self-defense in order to either protect possessions or to recover what people have been deprived of.

In Wright's works, violence as a sign of self-defense is an important variant in the daily behaviors of the characters. *Uncle Tom's Children* perfectly illustrates how, when caught up in a cycle with no way out, those who are dispossessed end up integrating violence as a means of struggle and liberation. From the second short story "Big Boy Leaves Homes," Wright set the scene for legitimate violence. Big Boy and his comrades venture into the pool of a wealthy man

named Jim. When they are caught red-handed by Jim's wife, nothing foreshadows any violence against the owner of the pool. However, when he comes out with a gun that he points at Big Boy and his comrades, threatening to kill them, violence takes place. As the narrative shows, it is not until Jim shoots at the children that Big Boy retorts, which signals Wright's intention to underline self-defense:

'Les go!' said Bobo, running toward the woods.

CRACK!

Lester grunted, stiffened, and pitched forward. His forehead struck a toe of the woman's shoes.

Bobo stopped, clutching the clothes. Buck whirled. Big Boy stared at Lester, his lips moving.

'Hes gotta gun!' Yelled Buck, running wildly.

CRACK!

Buck stopped at the edge of the embankment, his head jerked backward, his body arched stiffly to one side; he toppled headlong, sending up a shower of bright spray to sunlight. The creek bubbled.

Big Boy and Bobo backed away, their eyes fastened fearfully on a white man who was running toward them. He had a rifle and wore an army officer's uniform [...].

The white man released the rifle, jerked Bob to the ground, and began to batter the naked boy with his fists. Then Big Boy swung, striking the man in the mouth with the barrel. His teeth caved in, and he fell, dazed. Bobo was on his feet. (*UTC*, 29)

It is clear from this excerpt that Big Boy is obliged to intervene to rescue his comrade from Jim's violence. In such a situation, as the narrator contends, "It was his life against [his dispossessor's]" (*NS*, 236). The narrative further reveals that the fight goes on until Big Boy returns Jim's rifle against him and kills him. Nevertheless, the reader is left wondering whether the owner of the pool cannot claim to be in self-defense since his private ownership has been violated by intruders. Actually, Wright left the debate open. Yet no matter who is right or wrong in this controversial issue, all those involved in the conflict make use of violence. Jim can be said to be in self-defense while using his gun against the boys, and the boys can also be said to be in self-defense to avoid being shot down one after the other by Jim. What is clear, then, is that violence is used to defend one's possession.

Possession and defending it remain an imperative, especially when dispossession goes beyond material frameworks and touches dignity. What can a person do when, after losing any opportunity to acquire material possessions, he/she is faced with the dominant group's inclinations to dispossess him/her of dignity? Wright answered this question in "Long Black Song." In this short story, Silas is a hardworking man who risks the stability of his marriage to get out of economic dispossession. Yet it is at this precise moment that a young salesman undermines Silas's dignity by sexually abusing his wife Sarah under his marital roof. He, then,

has the arrogance to come back and ask him to pay for his graphophone. Wanting to force Sarah to make love to him,

she tried to pull her hand out of his and felt his fingers tightened. She pulled harder, and for a moment they were balanced, one against the other. Then he was at her side again, his arms about her [...]. She leaned backward and tried to dodge his face. Her breasts were full against him; she gasped, feeling the full length of his body. She held her head far to one side; she knew he was seeking her mouth. His hands were on her breasts again. A wave of warm blood swept into her stomach and loins. She felt his lips touching her throat and when he kissed it burned. (*UTC*, 112)

For Silas, this scene is the last straw. Just like a man in self-defense making use of everything at hand to save his dignity and/or his life, Silas begins to kick the young boy along with his comrade (*UTC*, 121-123). Despite the surrounding adversity, Silas does not flee like Sarah but rather faces those who have violated Sarah's dignity and his own. Analyzing the same scene, Timothy Caron comes to compare Big Boy to Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and Silas to his biblical counterpart who refuses to run away<sup>143</sup>. Much like Bigger in *Native Son*, Silas has finally decided to face the dispossessing forces without fleeing at the expense of his life, as though to suggest that it is only through resistance that the oppressed can feel some sense of freedom (Caron 53). In other words, as James Gilles contends, in the context of dispossession, flight is no answer as "all of *Native Son* asserts that fleeing to Chicago is not the answer to the Southern black man's oppression. It is merely a form of sleeping" (Giles 259). Giles likens Big Boy's flight in *Uncle Tom's Children* to Bigger's in *Native Son*. He comments that both in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*, Chicago remains a privilege place for the fleeing dispossessed black people. Yet, Giles contends that "despite the symbolic overtones of rebirth in flight, the rest of *Uncle Tom's Children* and certainly all of *Native Son* assert that fleeing to Chicago is not the answer to the Southern black man's oppression. It is merely a form of sleeping" (259). Giles' comment is corroborated by Richard himself who explains he "could never really leave the South, for [his] feelings had already been formed by the South" (*BB*, 298).

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<sup>143</sup> Silas is one of the Bible's characters. According to the Bible, Silas and his friend, Paul, were arrested and jailed for having delivered a maidservant from an evil spirit which made her predict the future. Because her predictions earned a lot of money to her masters, they sued Silas and Paul and had them jailed. While serving their sentence in jail, they sang, thanked and praised to God and all of a sudden, a violent earthquake broke out and knocked away the doors of the prison. The centurion, who noticed wide-open doors after the earthquake, thought Paul and Silas had escaped. Thus, he undertook to commit suicide for fear of being accused of complicity and sentenced to death. Paul and Silas called upon him and ensured him they could have fled but had not done so, because they were ready to die for the divine cause they were serving (Bible of Jerusalem, Acts of Apostles 16: 16-34). Silas in *Uncle Tom's Children*, much like the one in the Bible, refuses to run away because he is convinced of defending a just cause, namely delivering his wife from a rapist.

Indeed, flight cannot be the answer to dispossession, especially when one is surrounded and cornered everywhere by people threatening one's life. If flight were an answer, Lester and Buck would not be killed while running away; Mann would not be lynched by the mob following his inadvertent murder; and Bigger Thomas would not be caught by the police, and tortured before being sentenced to death. One can see that every time the dispossessed characters choose flight, they end up being caught and killed. Only those who stand up and face their dispossessors, though not a hundred per cent, have a chance to escape from death and Wright hints at it in *Uncle Tom's Children* where Big Boy, Reverend Taylor and his fellow demonstrators, who all face their dispossessors, have got a chance to survive. By the same token, in *Black Boy*, Richard faces the street gang, his family members and school mates with available weapons and finally gains respect and secures his life. Such self-defense values have been taught to Richard by his mother Ella right from an early age, especially when she sent him back to face the street gang which previously had stolen his money (Smith 129). In a few words, violence remains a significant option to fight for their rights. While exerting violence, the dispossessed characters have no other choice. Therefore, they do not feel any remorse or guilt because, in a context of self-defense, "violence is not necessarily viewed as an illicit conduct and the users therefore do not have to deal with feeling of guilt about their aggression" (Wolfgang, Ferracuti 95). Whether in Big Boy's murder of Jim, Silas's beating of the salesman, Mann's murder of Heartfield, Sue's shooting of the white mob, there has always been some part of self-defense as they are all, to some extent, compelled to make use of violence to save their own threatened lives. But to save one's life, one should gain the necessary power to resist and fight, and gaining such a power goes through violent means.

It can be safely maintained that human life is punctuated by the will of some to dominate others. For those who are daily dominated, negotiations or gentleness do not always allow them to get out of dispossession, as is the case with Reverend Taylor in *Uncle Tom's Children*. After his soft manners fail to convince the dominant group to stop its violence, he ends up using strong manners to reverse relation of power in order to force local authorities to provide food to those in need. The quest for power remains a significant motive for the violence perpetrated; at the same time, it means emerging from social, economic and political dispossession to gain possession.

Whether in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, one of the real motivations for the violence perpetrated by the dispossessed characters is the inversion of the balance of power in order to take and exercise power so as to definitively come out of social and economic deprivation. It should be noted that power is not always expressed physically. It can be moral

or psychological as is the case of Sue in *Uncle Tom's Children*, of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and of Richard in *Black Boy*. When the sheriff and his colleagues order Sue to come with a sheet of paper to wrap her son's corpse, she brings with her a gun to shoot them. Although she is finally shot dead, the narrative permits to read in her mind to discover that she feels satisfied because they "did not get what they wanted" (*UTC*, 215), which means she has taken the power from the sheriff before dying as a heroin like Silas.

Silas's death can also be seen as heroic, because he significantly challenges his dispossessors' power before dying. As Silas states, he works like a "slave, lika dog t get his farm free" (*UTC*, 143), and in any way is he ready "to keep them white trash bastard out" (*UTC*, 143). In other words, Silas goes so far as to make use of hard work to equal Whites in terms of economic power. He is ready to use violence to counteract those who use abusive power to dispossess him not only of his material wealth but also of his beloved wife. Indeed, Silas fights back in this violent competitive quest for power and even though he gets killed, he dies as a hero. As Bryant states, "In the most morally simplified cases, White violence against Blacks produce a victim, Black violence against Whites produces a hero" (Bryant 2). Bryant's statement is creditable but it should be noted that in some cases, Black violence against Blacks also produces a hero. When Bigger knocks Gus down and forces him to lick his knife, the knife is a symbol of Bigger's manhood and power which permits him to dominate the other members of the gang (*NS*, 191), just as evidenced in Mathews's analysis:

Bigger is not a man of words. [...] Instead he finds confidence in action so violent that it would make him forget his fear and humiliation. As we see [...] Bigger's status in the gang rests on his capacity for violence, not his facility with language. [...] Physical strength and fighting skills are valued qualities in urban black male culture; it is supposed to be the practice and appreciation [...] in a group setting that sets this culture apart from other, more general cultures or codes of masculinity. (Mathews 286)

As one can understand here, it is only through physical violence that Bigger takes power over his social group. For Krista Thomason, "creating violence permits Bigger to alleviate his sense of inferiority and to redefine himself according to his own choices; it also liberates Bigger from shame because it creates autonomy and control that cannot be attained except in violence" (Thomason 17-18).

Physical strength and fighting skills only determine one's value in black urban life which has been made a constant intra-racial fighting ring for power by dint of lingering dispossession. Violence has become so prevalent in black life that it has become some kind of sub-culture as Mathews pointed out earlier, and as Richard's fictional life corroborates. In fact, in his whole life, Richard has to practice violence to gain recognition in his social milieu. He

kills the cat to get his first triumph over his father (*BB*, 18-19), fights Aunt Addie to obtain peace in the family and fights his bothering schoolmates at Jim Hill Public School to take power and be accepted in the group (*BB*, 103; 137). It is the quest for such intra-racial power that leads Bigger to murder his fellow black female character named Bessie.

Another important point to highlight is violence against female characters. Society is patriarchal in a way that men can spend their time abusing women, and demonstrating their power over females. Bessie's and Mary's cases are telling examples of this reality. One can see that Bigger takes advantage of his position as a man to possess Mary's body and finally inadvertently kills her. By wanting to sexually possess the white woman, Bigger sets to overthrow the power of the white supremacist as the white woman is the symbol of white power<sup>144</sup> (Guttman 172). By the same token, Bessie's death could also be analyzed as a way for Bigger to demonstrate his masculine power. As Bessie lacks physical power to prevent Bigger from carrying out his violent plan against the Daltons after murdering their daughter, she stands as the black soft power which wants to dispossess Bigger of his newly acquired sense of power. So he uses his physical power just to kill her and removes her out of his way. Just like Mary, Bessie is sexually abused and finally killed by Bigger. Bigger's use of power against his own community members testifies that Whites as well as Blacks make use of violence. The only difference between white violence and black violence is that the former is legalized and the latter is deemed unlawful, which can be put in line with Anna Gee's comment:

In *Native Son*, both Whites and Blacks strive to regain control in powerless situations [...] both Whites and Blacks inflict pain and suffering on the victims of their violent actions. Unlike black violence, however, white violence is provided for and protected by the legislation [...]. In the world of *Native Son*, to some extent, the world in which we currently reside, black violence lacks the protection that permits white-on-black violence. While in theory violent acts committed by Whites or Blacks are equally reprehensible, the consequences of violence are significantly different for black citizens. (Gee 9)

Indeed, both Whites and Blacks use violence to gain power but while black violence is deemed unlawful, Whites' violence is legalized, as Gee analyzes. In *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy*, black characters such as Bobo, Lester, Mann, Silas, Johnny-Boy, Sue, and Hoskins are

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<sup>144</sup> Guttman raises the issue on Wright's stereotypical portrayal of female characters. She goes beyond racial issues to contend that whether females are black or white, they are all stereotypically portrayed and dominated by male power. As she contends, "Save for Zora Neale Hurston, contemporary reviewers and critics failed to note the stereotypical portrayals and brutal fates of female characters in *Native Son*" (Guttman 171). Nevertheless, Guttman takes enough care to make a clear distinction between the way violence on white females and that on black females are dealt with. For instance, sexual violence on white females is met with irreversible lynching to protect the myth of white power and supremacy, while sexual violence on black females is met with neglect, because they are viewed as "the easily accessible symbol of the uncivilized, animalistic black masses" (171).

killed by mobs but no judicial action is taken because it represents legal violence so that “peaceful and industrious people may be safe” (NS, 414). Yet, when one white girl is inadvertently murdered by a young black boy named Bigger, “eight thousand armed men combed cellars, old buildings and more than one thousand Negro homes in the Black Belt in a vain effort to apprehend Bigger Thomas [...] all over the city (NS, 256, 251). This form of violence is made legal because Bigger is viewed as a senseless and “sub-human killer [...] who knows no law, no self-control, and no sense of reason” (NS, 414; 408). Nevertheless, Bigger’s actions are partly the result of the extremely violent society he experiences, which makes him a violent man fighting to escape social nothingness to reach identity and self-creation.

When identity and self-creation are denied to people, they use violence to regain their lost identity by creating a self which can be recognized by the whole society that marginalizes and excludes them. While it is truly more difficult to make oneself known through good works, it should be noted that it is much easier to make oneself known through violent actions. In this respect, finding themselves unable to perform meaningful acts to gain recognition, destitute characters find refuge in violence in order to break out of total anonymity and come to the fore. Bigger’s entire life and his violent behavior testify his quest for self-consciousness and identity. He is ready to instill violence to anyone who could mask this identity. For instance, in attempting to prevent Bigger from enjoying the new identity that Mary’s murder has given him, Bessie is also killed by Bigger. Sara D. Scotland contends that Bigger’s killing of Bessie is an existential act, because she is an obstacle to his quest for freedom and identity: “Bigger then murders his girlfriend Bessie out of the fear that she will divulge his crimes. [...] Far from feeling remorse, Bigger is exhilarated; [...] killing is an existential act that gives him a sense of freedom and identity” (Scotland 4).

The perception of violence as a means of achieving self-creation lies in the fact that it allows those who have lost everything to gain some humanity and thus to move from dispossession to possession. In a society of excessive domination, these characters are not considered as subjects possessing the same or any human faculties as those who control financial means. In other words, they are simply not seen as complete and total human beings but rather as servants whose humanity is still to be proved. This lack of consideration and of human worth plunges them into a sense of endless captivity so that the only alternative left, however illegal, is violence. Ultimately, it is only through violence that they can force and impose their recognition. In *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, Richard and Bigger in particular use violence as self-creation and as a self-assertive tool which is a personal strategy to repossess their humanity. Bigger particularly starves from self-realization and becomes violent as a result

of this hunger (Matthews 277, 280). That is why, when Bessie starts questioning his actions, Bigger feels like killing her because he feels she wants to deny him a newly acquired sense of value and freedom (282). Because violence permits to reach some sense of value, Bigger is convinced that the reasons he kills for are the good ones. "What I killed for must've been good" (NS, 429), he mumbles. By the same token, in *Black Boy*, Richard finally views violence as something good as he decides to burgle and get money to flee to the North to accomplish himself<sup>145</sup> (BB, 222). Such an attitude shows how dispossession leads to insensitivity towards other fellow human beings.

Being deprived of one's identity from birth can lead to insensitivity. All those who use violence experienced a violent childhood to the point that no human suffering can impress or move them any longer. In such circumstances, they can exercise violence on anyone without the slightest remorse since violence is supposed to prove their humanity to those who do not recognize it. Gee's analysis points at how individuals like Bigger Thomas have become cold monsters before their oppressors. Bigger's humanity is denied and even when he attempts a romantic affair with Bessie to prove his emotions and therefore his humanity, Gee contends this relationship is that of an object to object with no human connection, which leads to Bigger's murder of Bessie:

Bigger can neither truly hate nor love: maltreatment by whites has ensured indifference. His attitude toward his love, Bessie, is not one of understanding or human connection but as one object observing and interacting with another. Disturbing as this dysfunction is in itself, its ramifications are far more sinister, culminating in Bigger's murder of Bessie. (Gee 5)

The dominant society is blind to Bigger's humanity. So, no matter the good action he does, he is not recognized as a human being. However, by committing violent actions, society is obliged to look at him and cannot turn a blind eye on his acts, which enables him to reach meaningful identity and humanity (17).

The use of violence can bring together other conditions which lead to the discovery of humanity. It seems paradoxical to argue that violence can allow an individual to discover his own humanity since violence is generally perceived as stemming from an animal instinct, or a

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<sup>145</sup> Richard's final decision to practice burglary is a glaring evidence that violence sometimes occurs when men like him are cornered and left no place of opportunity. Otherwise, how can one explain the fact that a very honest boy like Richard who even once refused to be fed by benefactors because he wanted to feed himself by the sweat of his forehead, finally balked at the temptation of burbling? For sure, as the narrative shows, Richard does everything in his capacity to earn enough money to flee northward for better living conditions, but the socio-economic system is set up in a way that leaves him no room for such hopes. In such circumstances, he reluctantly accepts that the only way for him to escape southern socio-economic determinism is to burgle, as though to suggest that in the context of fighting against lifelong dispossession, only the end justifies the means.



lack of self-control. Nevertheless, in the cases of Silas in *Uncle Tom's Children* and Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, this is far from a paradox:

As Bigger comes to terms with the effects of violence, he begins to feel remorse for his actions and, as a result, pity on the victims of his crimes. This remorse fosters an emotional connection with other human beings; providing Bigger with a sense of human identity. Before Bigger is able to develop interpersonal connections, he must recognize emotional similarities between himself and others. As Bigger recognizes that his violent acts have been the cause of suffering, he is able to relate to other human beings through his violence. Mary's boyfriend Jan, a white man that Bigger had previously resented, became a human being to him [...]. He had killed what this man loves and had hurt him. Jan becomes more real to Bigger because Bigger can now relate to him emotionally [...]. As his violence produces remorse, he recognizes that there are others around him suffering as he is [...]. Bigger's remorse produces emotional connection, ultimately reversing his objectification and binding him to human kind. (Gee 8)

Violence enables Bigger to create emotional relations with society. As he kills, he is feeling remorse because he is aware he has caused suffering to people, which enables him to relate emotionally to them and reverse his objectification into humankind. Bigger himself recognizes that violence gives him human identity as he articulates: "What I killed for, I am! (NS, 429). In saying so, Bigger implies violence is an integral part of his humanity and, contrary to others, this violence is a positive force which helps him recover his lost identity. In this vein, one could agree with Bigger because he is really considered as an object and the only way for him to prove his human identity, and thus to move from object to subject, is to practice violence in his excluding social environment (Gee 13-15). In this respect, Bigger is a war machine which, despite being condemned by society as a terrorist, triumphs over the oppressive social forces which block his subjectivity and reaches revolutionary becoming as conceptualized by Deleuze:

The ambiguity from which the war machine derives lies in the fact it only leaves negative traces throughout history. As evidence, any resistance is destined to be initially qualified as terrorism or destabilization, then it bitterly triumphs, and when it triumphs, [...] it derives from revolutionary becoming<sup>146</sup>. (Deleuze, 1990, 208-209)

One of the essential factors conducive to violence is exclusion and social hostility. In all the characters' lives, those who do not have the means of production feel excluded from any social welfare, which makes them embittered towards themselves and towards others. Social exclusion encourages them to exercise violence to express themselves and to draw the attention of the dominant social group to the need for deep social reforms guaranteeing the right to social welfare to everybody. The excluded are vulnerable because they are not allowed to maintain

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<sup>146</sup> « L'ambiguïté d'où la machine de guerre tire son nom vient de ce qu'elle ne laisse pas de trace autre que négative dans l'histoire. En témoigne le destin de toute résistance, d'être qualifiée d'abord de terrorisme ou de déstabilisation, puis de triompher amèrement, quand elle triomphe, [...] elle relève du "devenir révolutionnaire." »

emotional relationships with their social environment. Such relationships would have allowed them to nurture empathy towards others while preventing them from abusing their own fellows and being remorseful. When the socially excluded are driven into violence, they feel very little regret. On the contrary, seeing themselves as victims of domination and social dispossession, they shoulder the responsibility for their acts of violence as a rational form of rebellion and heroism against the social status quo. Sheldon Brivic says of Bigger's murder that it is the result of social exclusion; so he is a kind of victim who rebels and becomes a hero taking authority on his oppressors:

On the rational level, the crime is forced on Bigger by circumstances and society and he is a victim. On the emotional level, he takes responsibility for the crime as an act of rebellion and becomes a hero. [...] Feeling a sense of purpose and responsibility for the first time, Bigger gains power and ability such as he had never possessed. Now he can face them with a sense of being superior because he has fooled them. (Brivic 234)

Social exclusion misses no opportunity to make dispossessed people embittered and rebellious against their prevailing social plight, just as evidenced by Richard who states life experience "ha[s] turned [him] to the side of those in rebellion" (*BB*, 112), because it has excluded him from his social environment. The bitterness of the characters turns against other individuals who themselves suffer from exclusion. This idea is shared by Makombe who also argues that the prevailing social exclusion in the South makes Blacks embittered against each other, even though they sometimes bow day and night to Whites' willingness (Makombe 297-298). It is precisely this mutual resentment that makes Harrison and Richard in *Black Boy* succumb to the trap of the Whites who have sowed doubt and mistrust between them and made them fight in exchange of an insignificant sum of money. After fighting, Richard recognizes that Whites have succeeded in planting the risk of becoming murderers in all dispossessed Blacks. In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas is a case in point. Indeed, a short sentence uttered by Bigger fully explains the exclusion he is victim of and which leads him to murder: "They don't let us do nothing" (*NS*, 22), Bigger shortly spits out. By dint of not being allowed to do anything, Bigger finds in violence a means of expression to act against social prejudice and exclusion, as his own words testify at length:

Yeah, [Max] [...] I reckon it was because they say we black men do that anyhow. Mr. Max, you know what some white man say we black do? They say we rape white women when we got the clap and they say we do that because we believe if we rape white women we'll get rid of the clap. That's what some white men say. They believe that. Jesus, Mr. Max, when folks say things like that about you, you whipped before you born. What's the use? Yeah, I reckon I was feeling that way when I was in the room with her. They say we do things like that and they say it to kill us. They draw a line and say for you to stay on your side of the line. They don't care if there're no bread over on

your side. They don't care if you die. And then they say things like that about you and when you try to come from behind your line they kill you [...]. Yeah; I reckon I was feeling that way and maybe the reason is because they say it. Maybe that was the reason. (NS, 276)

Bigger's words reveal that social oppression led him to the murder of Mary. Bigger repeats "They say" six times to insist on the authoritative discourse and restrictions imposed on black men like him by America which is, to borrow from Agbessi, "A society that has developed on the construction of the white community's dominant discourse which has got an impact on that of minorities in public space, an impact which is all the stronger since the American Constitution guarantees equality [...]."<sup>147</sup> (Agbessi 362). Mary's sexual abuse by Bigger is his response to the white dominant sexual discourse or sexual line drawn to exclude him from any emotional contact with girls or women belonging to the upper class. In a word, it is a very aggressive response to the dominant social group which has been created by the hostility of his social environment to contain him in his place.

Yet, violence ensures social survival. For instance, in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Big Boy challenges and kills a snake which wants to keep him from hiding in the hole on the hillside to escape from mob lynching (*UTC*, 41-42). While people like Big Boy and Richard have seen their loved ones violently killed, they come to understand that in a society comparable to a jungle, the dominant group imposes a leonine distribution of socio-economic well-being. The only way out remains to wrest social well-being by violence as it is theirs by right. Wright uses a particularly brutal and aggressive language to express this reality. The reader is made to perceive it through Big Boy's fantasy:

He jerked another blade and chewed. Yeah, ef Pa had only let im have tha shotgun! He could stan off a whole mob wid a shotgun. He looked at the ground as he turned a shotgun over in his hands. Booom! The man curled up. Another came. He reloaded quickly, and let him have what the other had got. He too curled up. Then another came. He got the same medicine. The whole mob swirled around him, and he blazed away, getting as many as he could. (*UTC*, 44).

The language Wright used to describe Big Boy's fantasy is particularly violent. Big Boy dreams of facing Whites with his father's gun to make as many victims as possible before being caught. In another scene, where Big Boy fiercely fights a snake to get access to a hiding place, Wright's descriptive language also highlights extreme violence:

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<sup>147</sup> « Une société [américaine] qui s'est développée autour de la construction du discours dominant de la communauté blanche et a eu une incidence sur celui des minorités dans l'espace public. Un impact d'autant plus fort que la Constitution américaine apporte des garanties en matière d'égalité [...]. »

He went to the right, and the flat head followed him, the blue-black tongue darting forth; he went to the left, and the flat head followed him there too. He stopped, teeth clenched. [...] The flat head reared higher. With stick over shoulder, he jumped in, swinging. The stick sang through the air, catching, catching the snake on the side of the head, sweeping him out of coil. There was a brown writhing mass. Then Big Boy was upon him, pounding blows home, one on top of the other. He fought viciously, his eyes red, his teeth bared in a snarl. He beat till the snake lay still; then he stomped it with his heel, grinding its head into dirt. He stopped, limp, wet. The corners of his lips were white with spittle. He spat and shuddered. (*UTC*, 41-42)

Big Boy fights the snake like a raving demon and even when it is dead, he carries on pounding on it, which reveals his deep anger. The snake epitomizes Big Boy's oppressors, thus, the violence Big Boy is able to inflict shows what he is ready to do to stay alive. The language chosen by Wright to depict this scene is called "showing". This literary technique consists in using a colorful language to describe fictional events so that the reader perceives images and sees and feels them as in real-life situations. Big Boy's violent killing of the snake symbolizes his battle with his oppressors, just as Bigger's and Richard's respective killings of the rat and the kitten symbolize their battle with the oppressive family environment. Bigger and Richard cannot, however, understand their parents' violence on them:

The authoritarian discipline of the Black American mother, she maintained thanks to her whip, is driven by a double feeling: fear and love. The mother fears that the child will become aggressive, a characteristic that can lead him to transgress racial taboos and put his life and even that of his community at risk. So she exerts a draconian discipline towards him. Paradoxically, however, the mother's severity has the same effects and consequences as lynching, insofar as it contributes to emasculate the child's personality<sup>148</sup>. (Mvé Bekale 115)

To address this issue of hostile family environment, Bigger and Richard have chosen to punish anyone who causes intra-family violence and, in turn, social violence. Bigger especially hates his family members and even considers murdering them in his subconscious, all of which speaks to the hostility that prevails in his family (Matthews 281), and as the narrative reveals, he wants to "wave his hand and blot them out" (*NS*, 99). *Black Boy* also confirms the family hostility Matthews talks about. Richard apparently finds himself in a one-against-all situation in his own grand family. While Richard's grand family members show him hostile attitudes, he falls into the same hostility towards his father whom he accuses of being responsible for his suffering as he has left his mother and fiddles with a girl-friend. Just as Bigger considers

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<sup>148</sup> « La discipline autoritaire de la mère noire américaine, maintenue grâce au fouet, est mue par un double sentiment : la peur et l'amour. La mère craint que l'enfant ne devienne agressif, caractéristique qui pourrait le pousser à transgresser les tabous raciaux et à mettre sa vie en danger, voire celle de la communauté dans laquelle il vit. Aussi a-t-elle à son égard une discipline draconienne. Mais paradoxalement, la sévérité de la mère a les mêmes effets et conséquences que le lynchage, dans la mesure où elle contribue à émasculer la personnalité de l'enfant. »

blotting out his family in his sub-conscious, Richard wishes his grand family would decide to kill his father, which signals the climax of antagonism in the family. Richard refuses to submit to family hostility and responds to violence with violence, as evidenced by his brawls with Aunt Addie and Uncle Tom (*BB*, 120). He justifies these brawls by the fact that “there [w]ere more violent quarrels in [their] religious house than in the home of a gangster, a burglar, or a prostitute” (*BB*, 150). The same family hostility drives Richard to kill the meowing cat (*BB*, 17-18), just as Bigger violently kills the rat, to express his protest against his hostile family environment. In *Black Boy*, family resentment towards Richard has become so significant that he is almost “quarantined”:

One afternoon I made a discovery in the home that stunned me. I was talking to my cousin, Maggie, who was a few months younger than I, when Uncle Tom entered the room. He paused, stared at me with silent hostility, then called his daughter. I gave the matter no thought. A few moments later I rose from my chair, where I had been reading, and was on my way to down the hall when I heard Uncle Tom, scolding his daughter. I caught a few phrases: ‘Do you want me to break your neck? Didn’t I tell you to stay away from him? That boy’s a dangerous fool. I tell you! Then why don’t you keep away from him? And make the other children keep away from him! Ask me no question, but do as I tell you! Keep away from him, or I’ll skin you!’ (*BB*, 191)

As it is made clear, Maggie, Richard’s cousin, is severely scolded and forbidden by Uncle Tom to be close to Richard. Uncle Tom’s attitude towards Richard is proof that he has been rejected by his foster family members who make “his throat grew tight with anger” (*BB*, 191), and make him delve into bitterness. This situation eventually compels him to fight “to avoid being crushed” (*BB*, 150). Butler wondered about such a ubiquitous hostile social and family environment in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, and while particularly giving Bigger’s killing of Bessie and Mary much thought, he comes to two basic conclusions: “Bessie [is] the externalization not only of his [Bigger’s] environment but also the self-hatred induced by that environment. Killing her is an attempt to destroy that part of him which is trapped in self-loathing and despair” (Butler 18).

As far as Mary’s murder is concerned, Bigger kills her because “she represents a side of [him] that can be called ‘romantic’ because it is centered in an idealized set of longings for a radically new life based upon expanded possibilities” (11). Yet the hostile social environment never gives Bigger any opportunity to discover romantic life since, in his fictional world, people relate to each other only through violence. This analysis raises the following question: why did Wright include so much violence in his works? Though Chester Himes is hinting at the detective novel in his explanation, it provides an interesting explanation:

No one, no one writes violence the way Americans do. As a matter of fact, for the simple reason that no one understands violence or experiences violence like the American civilians do [...], American violence is a public way of life, it became a form. So I would think that any number of black writers should go into the detective story form. (Himes 48)

Indeed, Himes viewed American violence as a way of life because, to him, the American nation was built on violence. Himes himself spent at least seven years in jail and his prison experience and violent adulthood influenced his writing just as the same violent real-life experiences influenced Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. To use violence in his writing allowed Wright to regain the rights his hostile social environment had taken away from him. Violence was dragged along by the unfair environment as the dominant group set rules to control weaker people's ways of life. Yet, as philosopher Robert Nozick contends, when some individuals determine the ways of life of others, "[the] process whereby they take this decision from [them] makes them part-owner[s]; it gives them a property right on [people], just as an animal or inanimate object" (Nozick in Gee 15). When people are alienated and considered as properties or objects, they make use of violence to leap out of objectification and enter the realm of the subject (Gee 15). That is why in *Native Son*, Bigger wants to blot out his mother and family members because they control his life too much (*NS*, 88), just as Richard is at loggerheads with his family members such as Granny, Addie and Uncle Tom who want to control his whole life but do not show him any parental love. Yet where parental love is insufficient, children may become aggressive and revert to violence.

Violence is sometimes the result of atrocities that one saw or experienced during childhood. As a matter of fact, the accumulation of horrors, fears and terror that children experience makes them familiar with violence in a way that makes them reproduce it in their own environment. This is corroborated by Mvé Bekale's analysis of Bigger's violent personality:

The repeated attacks of the rats, Bigger's paranoid attitude, easily overcome stoical morality. Bigger and the rat here establish a climate of violence, dominated by shouting, insults, explosive anger, making it impossible to share the social roles his mother is trying to establish. Vera takes the side of the mother and her sister by railing against Bigger, while Buddy, the youngest child, stands against his mother and his sister to protect his brother; thus the Thomases find themselves divided into two clans. This implies the state of disorder. [...] So far from strengthening the hero's personality, the constant clashes within the family make Bigger irascible, hateful, impulsive, angry, hypersensitive. [...] As a result, the family atmosphere largely contributes to his criminal personality<sup>149</sup>. (Mvé Bekale 104-105)

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<sup>149</sup> « Les attaques répétées des rats, le caractère paranoïaque de Bigger viennent facilement à bout de cette morale stoïque. Bigger et le rat instaurent ici un climat de violence, dominé par des cris, des injures, des colères explosives,

Mvé Bekale's comment implies that family love and tenderness contribute to counteract children's violent tendencies but where it does not exist, children display ruthless behaviors when they become adults. Thus, it is not surprising that after a violent childhood, Big Boy grows into a violent and murderous character to become Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. As a matter of fact, the various non-conformist attitudes displayed by Wright's characters are a *pronunciamiento* against the suffocating social and dispossessing environment they have been compelled to live in<sup>150</sup>. This concept mirrors Deleuze's "war machine." By going through rebellion, Wright's characters fight against their suffocating and dispossessing environment, they take their destiny into their hands and become what Deleuze named "war machines." The "war machine", however, does not have war as an objective and does not leave negative acts in its wake like *pronunciamiento*. Instead it is characterized by a new linear and smooth space composed by those who are seen as "war machines" and who try to spread their renewed vision and perception around them. These processes of "becoming", to borrow again from Deleuze's concept, where one is associated with violence and the other is not, allow the wrightean characters to move from dispossession to (re)possession so that they can question the social status quo, defy conventions and ultimately gain a new sense of self and humanism, as shall be seen in the third and last part.

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rendant impossible le partage des rôles sociaux que la mère tente d'instituer. Vera prend le parti de la mère et sa sœur en vitupérant Bigger, tandis que Buddy, le Benjamin, se dresse contre sa mère et sa sœur pour protéger son frère ; ainsi les Thomas se trouvent-ils divisés en deux clans. Ce qui implique l'état de désordre. [...] Loin donc de fortifier la personnalité du héros, les constants heurts au sein du foyer familial rendent Bigger irascible, haineux, impulsif, coléreux, hypersensible. [...] En conséquence l'ambiance familiale contribue largement à sa personnalité criminelle. »

<sup>150</sup> *Pronunciamiento* is a borrowing from Spanish. It refers to militaries' revolt and subsequent seizing of power. In one word, it is a putsch. In the three novels of the corpus, Wright's protagonists act as militaries revolting and wanting to overthrow the power of the dominant group that imprisoned them in a suffocating environment.

## **PART THREE**

### **FROM DISPOSSESSION TO REPOSSESSION**



In Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Wright projects the persistence of real-life dispossession that he himself experienced, but he does not play down the various strategies used by the characters who are dispossessed to handle their daily dispossessions. Wright makes it clear through his three works that ubiquitous dispossession compels those who are submitted to it to find ways and means to come to terms with their daily plight. Because conforming to the prevailing various forms of dispossession does not make the dispossessed people feel any better, a lot of Wright's characters choose to shift perspective by embracing non-conformism as a weapon to fight for true emancipation and dignity. Ranging from *Uncle Tom's Children* through *Native Son* to *Black Boy*, non-conformism has become a salient issue in the fictional lives of the protagonists. When characters become non-conformists, they act in rebellious ways with the aim of bridging all the possible events which gather the necessary conditions for dispossession to take place.

Therefore, this part will firstly analyse reluctance and resistance as some of the fundamental non-conformist strategies used by the deprived characters to question the social, economic and political status quo. In the context of dispossession, the oppressed characters are denied any humanity and made to abide by laws and ethics which do not take their living context into consideration. They are socio-culturally, economically and politically governed by discriminatory laws and morals pushing them to the margin of society, which urges non-conformist characters to contest these laws and ethics. In this respect, the various ways in which non-conformist characters challenge conventional laws and morality as contributing to further dispossession, then, will be examined. Indeed, in a context where the dominant social group has got full power and control over culture, economy and politics, choosing non-conformism is not a pushover for non-conformist characters, as this choice obviously drags along a number of consequences. Notwithstanding their awareness of such risks, those who are under the yoke of dispossession do not give up as long as their struggle can bring back their human dignity. That is why it will finally be deemed important to unravel the ways non-conformism leads to the recovery of some sense of self and humanism in the daily lives of the characters.

## CHAPTER VII: QUESTIONING THE DISPOSSESSING SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STATUS QUO

Dispossession as Wright depicted it in his three works has become established as a normal social, economic and political pattern to be recognized and respected by every member of society. In other words, dispossession has been erected as a sacred status quo and any-one who attempts to trouble this status quo is accordingly dealt with. Yet, through his characterization, Wright intended to shake the prevailing status quo which has set up two worlds: the minor group which toils every day to feed the national economy and is yet excluded from any socio-economic welfare, and the major group which enjoys the outcomes of the work of the toiling minor group.

To better understand Wright's questioning of such an unfair status quo, this section will first consider the Socio-Economic Establishment in which Wright's characters live. Because they are made to work and yet excluded from the economic progress, Wright built these characters in a way to resist such an Establishment through various strategies. The socio-economic inequalities which can be observed in Wright's fictional world was born from the blatant promotion of capitalistic practices (as is the case, for instance, in *Native Son*) that Wright intended to counter by alternative ideologies such as communism. With a view to understanding the prevailing tension between capitalism and communism in the three novels, my second step will consist in demonstrating that this tension is kept alive by Wright whose objective was to use communism as an ideological weapon against dispossessing capitalism. Capitalism deprives the poor minorities of almost everything to such an extent that they fall into socio-cultural fragmentation. On closer inspection, it can be seen that Wright's use of communism to counter capitalism partly aimed at piecing back together the fragmented socio-cultural lives of the dispossessed minorities. That is why it is deemed important to end this section by highlighting the particular quest of Wright's characters for socio-cultural wholeness through non-conformist attitudes and deeds.

## 1. Writing to Resist the Socio-Economic Establishment

Social dispossession in Wright's novels has resulted in the socio-economic polarization of society. There are those who own the means of production and control the economy and those who work to fuel that economy. In theory the United States, which is the setting of Wright's three works under study, sees itself as a nation of equal opportunity and socio-economic progress. Yet there is a paradox since the holders of financial power have worked under Jim Crow laws to twist the principles to their advantage and have risen to the top of what can be described as American socio-economic Establishment. The proponents of the means of production enjoy all the privileges while the poor Blacks encounter a blockage in their attempts to leave their social class and climb up the social ladder. They are condemned to work and feed the disproportionate ambitions of members of the dominant social group. This socio-economic stagnation of workers, who are dispossessed of all rights of access to the upper class, leads to class conflicts wherein they rebel and refuse to comply with the fundamental principles of spatial separation that the socio-economic Establishment imposes on them. Wright wonderfully projects this situation for the black community in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy*.

The opening short story of Wright's collection titled "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" sufficiently informs the reader about the racial socio-economic categorization which prevails in American society. Indeed, on the one hand, one can see a man named Jim and his wife enjoy all the social privileges such as best conditions of housing, food and entertainment. By the way, Wright names his well-to-do character "Jim" to picture the Jim Crow system which is the symbol of legal social, economic and political discrimination against colored people. On the other hand, one can see individuals like Big Boy, Bobo, Lester and Buck live in socio-economic precariousness. Wright in his revolutionary conception of society constructs this scene where he allows members of the lower social class to venture into Jim's pool, in violation of the principle of Jim Crowist social separation<sup>151</sup>. To better reveal the lower social membership of

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<sup>151</sup> In "The Ethics of Uncle Tom's Children," Tommie Shelby explains that the oppressed have no control over theory oppression but have control over how to react to oppression: to conform or to resist. However, because conforming to unjust regimes is encouraging the legitimacy of this regime, the oppressed must find ways and means to contest the legitimacy of oppressive regimes. It is true that any reform movement encounters the reluctance of the dominant group, but through solidarity, the oppressed group can still achieve reform of unfair laws such as the Jim Crow laws by dint of perpetual violations as Wright's protagonists do (Shelby 522, 523, 524, 525).

the boys, Wright makes use of vernacular English, a type of language which is largely spoken in black ghettos and which reveals them as poor and under-educated people.

‘C mon!’  
‘Where yuh-all goin?’  
‘T thr creek fer a swim.’  
‘Yeah, les swim.’  
‘Naw Buddy naw!’ said Big Boy, slapping the air with a scorn palm.  
‘Aa, c mon! Don be a heel!’  
‘N git lynched! Hell naw!’  
‘He ain gonna see us.’[...].  
Yuh-all go on. Ahma stay right her,’ said Big Boy. (*UTC*, 20)

As this excerpt reveals, before being convinced by his comrades to break into Jim’s pool for a swimming party, Big Boy is aware that such an action could result in their lynching if they were ever caught. Nevertheless, his comrades’ insistence ends up convincing him to join them.

Big Boy and his classmates should be at the designated school for them but they refuse to study in precarious conditions while people like Jim and his wife enjoy the pleasures of pool water. As a result, they turn away from school for a fun ride in the pool which is forbidden to lower-class people as the sign at the entrance indicates, “No Trespassing!” Big Boy and his comrades refuse to comply with the injunction of this sign and throw themselves into the swimming pool. This scene reflects Wright’s commitment to equal opportunity and further suggests that the sustainability of the socio-economic system should be challenged as Big Boy and his comrades do. Wright makes Big Boy and his comrades sing a blues song to further reveal through lyrical language their yearning for what is dispossessed to them<sup>152</sup>:

*Bye n bye*  
*Ah wanna piece of pie*  
*Pies too sweet*  
*Ah wanna piece of meat*  
*Meats too red*  
*Ah wanna piece of bread*  
*Breads too brown*  
*Ah wanna go t town*  
*Town so far*  
*Ah wanna ketch a car [...]* (*UTC*, 22)

From this song, the reader can guess the degree of the boys’ dispossession as it suggests they have no pie, no bread, no meat, and no town, let alone a car. Therefore, diving in a swimming

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<sup>152</sup> As Jeffrey Jorvath contends, blues is a politically committed musical genre. The use of blues testifies Wright’s will to advocate for more politically proactive Blacks to achieve political reforms. Blues music advocates for a new music which take into account the oppression of Negro under other forms after the abolition of slavery. It calls for an individual reaction to the dispossession of the black subject who was no longer enslaved but controlled by laws and politics (Jorvath 2, 6, 7). Wright’s characters sing blues not only to reveal their plight but also to press for social and political reforms conducive to Black American full emancipation.

pool is luxury for these people from lower social classes, since this privilege is reserved only for those who have got means and control the entire socio-economic sphere.

Wright suggests that this sphere has become so garish and even unbearable that some people, though coming from the upper social class, realize it and now refuse to conform to this unjust system and work against it. Such non-conformism can be described as intra-class rebellion and can be perceived through Wright's characterization of Mary in *Native Son* and Mr. Crane in *Black Boy*. Mary comes from the upper class as she is the daughter of Mr. Dalton, a wealthy liberal who owns a lot of tenements which he rents to the poor inhabitants of the Black Belt. Notwithstanding her belonging to the upper class, Mary Dalton comes out of this comfort, violates social separation and gets in direct contact with people not belonging to her social class. Mary's non-conformist behavior turns out to be a strange social maverick which even scares and puts Bigger into self-questioning as can be understood through the narrative:

She was an odd girl, all right. He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspires in him. She responded to him as if he was human, as if he lived in the same world as he. The hard guarded feeling of freedom he had never felt while listening to her was tangled with the hard fact that she was white and rich, a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do. And he had never felt that before in a white person. But why? Was this some kind of game? (NS, 64).

Bigger is so baffled at Mary's attitude towards him that he wonders whether it is a game. One could be tempted to help Bigger find answers to his questions by reassuring him that it is not a game at all and that Mary's behavior reflects her desire to break down social barriers based on economy and social class which are only constructions of human mind but not natural rules. However, such answers would not be enough to shed light on Bigger's lantern as Mary and Jan continue to perform acts more than usual to him<sup>153</sup>. When Bigger finds himself unusually seated in the vehicle wedged between two upper-class individuals, Mary and Jan, this situation raises more questions in Bigger and an example of this can be seen in the scene where he, Mary and Jan enter the car together:

He moved closer to Jan. Mary pushed herself in, wedging tightly between him and the outer door of the car. There were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls. Never in his life had he been so close to a white woman. He smelt the odor of her hair and felt the soft pressure of her thigh against his

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<sup>153</sup> Mary and Jan are members of the dominant group and their attitude should normally reassure Bigger. However, because Bigger does not trust any member of the dominant group in his questioning of the social and racial status quo, he feels more dumbfounded than ever while being put too close to Mary and Jan. If there was no racial separatism and violence, Bigger would not be afraid of Mary and Jan (Guttman 179). Wright shows the difficult relationship between the dominant group and the dominated one but still believes that racelessness and classlessness are possible. In Mary's bedroom, Bigger and Mary touch each other, which is a suggestion of a world deprived of race and class (178).

own [...]. He flushed warm with anger. Godamn her soul to hell! Was she laughing at him? Were they making fun of him? What was it that they wanted? Why didn't they leave him alone? [...] He was trying desperately to understand. (NS, 66)

In this scene, Wright reveals his personal position against the taboo of spatial separation between the rich and the poor, Blacks and Whites, and invites the richest to help the poorest get out of their situation of poverty.

As already shown earlier, Wright refused any racial definitions and advocated for cross-racial understanding and help. This position is embodied in the construction of Mr. Crane's character in *Black Boy* who, like Mary Dalton, refuses to conform to the socio-economic status quo and sets out to help Richard. Although Pease and Reynolds, conforming to this status quo, try to prevent Richard from learning a professional job which they deem to be the prerogative of Whites, Mr. Crane persists in bringing Richard into the world of decent work. In a scene where Richard almost loses his temper, Mr. Crane is determined to help him against all odds:

'Come in, Richard,' Mr. Crane said [...].  
He stared at me and shook his head.  
'Tell me, what happened?'  
An impulse to speak rose in me and died with the realization that I was facing a wall that I would never breach. I tried to speak several times and could make no sounds. I grew tense and tears burnt my cheeks.  
'Now, just keep control of yourself,' Mr. Crane said.  
I clenched my fists and managed to talk.  
'I tried to do my best here,' I said.  
'I believe you,' he said. 'But I want to know what happened. Which one bothered you?'  
'Both of em,' I said.  
Reynolds came running to the door and I rose. Mr. Crane jumped to his feet.  
'Get back in here,' he told Reynolds [...].  
Reynolds backed away, keeping his eyes on me. (BB, 210-211)

In this scene, Mr. Crane questions Richard after he has been threatened by Reynolds and Pease who want to prevent him from learning a professional job. As can be understood, Mr. Crane wishes to violate the socio-economic status quo and obviously wants to help Richard learn a job in order to gain economic independence one day. To do so, he reassures Richard: "Don't be afraid. Nobody's going to hurt you" (BB, 212). By making Mr. Crane shout Reynolds back to the workshop, Wright makes the reader understand that he symbolically represses the whole oppressive socio-economic Establishment back into silence. And as Reynolds backs away, keeping his eyes on Richard, this testifies Wright's intention to highlight the victory of classless society over a categorized one. What is more, Wright's naming his character Pease is ironical since he does not bring any peace at all in the optical shop. Actually, Pease acts contrary to his name just as America, which is tantamount to a land of freedom and equal rights, acts contrary

to its main motto by refusing access to decent jobs to lower class people like Richard. It could also sound ironical that a poor black boy is named Richard but, indeed, this is also meant by Wright to show that the poor black boy is ready to challenge the socio-economic Establishment to become rich by working hard. By challenging the socio-economic Establishment, Richard really hopes to become a “richard” one day.

The socio-economic Establishment is such that those in financial power also control the market and organize it so that they can extract all the profits at the expense of the toiling masses. So even when for a few rare times, financially dispossessed characters manage to own something that they want to sell to the rich, it is the latter who determine the price and not the seller. Wright experienced this situation when he was still living with his mother in West Elena. As his mother fell sick and failed to provide him with enough food, he decided to sell his unique dog to a white woman to afford for food. However, because she wanted to impose on him an insignificant price, Wright refused to sell his dog and reported this mishap to his mother. Wright’s refusal can be seen as protest against economic unfairness and he projects this real-life situation in *Black Boy* to highlight his personal vision of fair economic relationship between the rich and the poor:

‘Do you want to buy a pretty dog?’ I [Richard] asked.  
‘I just love this dog,’ and I am going to buy her. [ ... ] All I have is ninety-seven cents’ [ ... ]  
‘No, ma’am,’ I said softly. ‘I want a dollar.’ [ ... ]  
‘But what could you want with a dollar now?’ she asked.  
‘I want to buy something to eat.’  
‘Then ninety-seven cents will buy you a lot of food,’ she said.  
‘No ma’am. I want my dog.’  
‘Here is your dog,’ she snapped, thrusting Betsy into my arms.  
‘Now, get away from here.’  
‘You’re just about the craziest nigger boy I ever did see.’ (*BB*, 79-80)

In this scene, faced with the white woman’s attempts to buy his dog Betsy at less than the set price, Richard refuses to sell his dog to such an insignificant sum of money. One can agree with Makombe that Richard’s refusal to take the white woman’s 97 cents for his dog symbolizes Wright’s triggering the process of socio-economic decolonization <sup>154</sup>(Makombe 309). Later, Richard challenges a publisher who wants to exploit his intellectual production without paying him. In fact, after writing his short story that he titled “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre” and

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<sup>154</sup> For Makombe, Richard and his community are colonized and therefore powerless. The white woman wants to use Richard’s desperate economic situation to exploit him. However, Richard refuses to balk at her pressure and takes his dog away. Such an attitude, for Makombe, marks the beginning of decolonization which is “a process of stepping outside the limits of the colonizer’s episteme” (309).

submitting it to a publisher, the latter wants to publish it for free in order to promote his journal. As a result, Richard questions the publisher's attitude:

'It set up in type,' he said. 'We're publishing it.'  
'How much money will I get?' I asked, excited.  
'We can't pay for manuscript,' he explained.  
'But you sell your papers for money,' I said with logic.  
'Yes, but we're young in business,' he explained.  
'But you you're asking me to give you my story, but you don't give your papers away,' I said. [...] If the story is good enough to sell to your readers, then you ought to give me some of the money you get from it [...]. (BB, 183)

In this scene Richard refuses the publisher's proposal to publish his short story for free whereas he does not sell his papers for free. Actually, Wright subtly critiques the publishers who exploited the poor minds of African American artists to feed their cultural industry without them benefiting from the outcomes of their artistic productions. Indeed, from the Harlem Renaissance to Wright's period as a writer, although the American cultural industry promoted Black American artistic productions, permitting them to move from invisibility to visibility, most of them could not live by their art. They remained locked out of financial independence and always compelled to resort to well-to-do publishers who monopolized the cultural means of production.

One of the strategies used to challenge the socio-economic supremacy of the dispossessors turns around non-conformism, criticism, or condemnation in absentia. In law, when a defendant or individual commits judicially reprehensible acts and refuses to appear in court to explain himself, he is tried in absentia and all the strictness of law applies to him at this time. The same strategy is used by Wright's dispossessed characters to express their disapproval of the socio-economic status quo which deprives the poor to feed the rich. It should be noted that the tribunal erected by the dispossessed is not an official and visible tool which aims to judge and condemn the dispossessors, because the only official and all-powerful justice in the context of dispossession is the one that serves the interests of dispossessors and their assistants. Any attempt to establish a tribunal to judge and challenge the domination of the rich over the poor is simply impossible given the risks of violence or even death that it would entail. Wright himself was faced with political persecution not only by white supremacist groups but also by the American Intelligence Services due to his initial communist-oriented questioning of American capitalistic model of society. To use subtler ways to critique American social class system, Wright used literature. That is why in his literary works, the deprived characters have their courts in the form of monologues or small group talks venting their challenge or opposition to dispossession. Such a strategy is acted out through Bigger's and Taylor's monologues:



“Godamn! Godamn that woman!” (NS, 55); “The good Lawd gonna clean up this ol worl some day!”<sup>155</sup> (UTC, 131). Bigger and Taylor are submissive and respectful in the presence of the members of the dominant social group, but once alone they do not hesitate to judge, condemn and express their contempt towards them in monologues. Actually, these monologues express Wright’s own contempt for American social class system made up of discrimination and oppression.

In the socio-economic Establishment born out of dispossession, the dominant group imposes respect on the dominated group who almost worships those who deny them their rights, and though it complies with the dispossessing Establishment in the presence of dispossessors, they manage to express their disgust towards it in their absence. Moreover, this form of non-conformism allows those who are deprived of socio-economic means to organize and defend themselves against oppression. For example, in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, although Big Boy is guilty of murdering Jim, his community and family organize his departure to Chicago to put him out of harm’s way and to prevent him from being lynched:

‘Sister Morrison, ef yuh don let im go n git erway from here hes gonna be caught; shos theres a Gawd in Heaven!’ Lucy came running with Big Boy’s shoes and pulled them on his feet. The old man thrust a battered hat on his head. The mother went to the stove and dumped the skillet of corn pone into her apron. She wrapped it, and unbuttoning Big Boy’s overalls, pushed it into his bosom. ‘Heres something fer yuh t eat; n pray, Big Boy, cause thas all anybody kin do now [...]’ Big Boy pulled to the door, his mother clinging to him [...]. Big Boy raced across the yard, scattering the chicken. (UTC, 39-40)

Big Boy’s family decide to send him to Chicago. By doing so, they express non-conformism to white authority. Because Jim Crow laws did not give any other opportunity than being respectful to those who dispossess and oppress them, some non-conformist individuals stand up and have the courage to insult the dispossessor in his absence. However, Silas, in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, does not hesitate to show his hatred and call those who oppress his community “white trash, bastards, white ape, sonofabitch” (UTC, 118). Even Taylor, who seems to be so devoted to the cause of his God and tends to calm the ardor of his community’s youth against dispossession, ends up rebelling and invokes the wrath of his God to crash them down: “Gawd,

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<sup>155</sup> Monologue is a key symbol of reluctance or rebellion. In everyday life, when an individual disagrees with a given decision affecting his life and is yet powerless before the decision-maker, monologue is sometimes used to express disapproval. It is common for children who disagree with their parents to mumble monologues to show their disagreement or disdain. Similarly, when Wright’s oppressed characters cannot express their disdain before their oppressors, they do it through monologues in a sometimes virulent way as Reverend Taylor does. Monologue also appears as a literary technique which permits the reader to perceive the protagonist’s thought while the antagonist does not. For example, through Taylor’s monologue, the reader knows that he contests the white world while Whites themselves in his fictional world are not aware of this reality.

ef yuh gimme the strength Ahll tear this ol building down! Tear it down, Lawd! Tear it down like ol Samson tore the temple down” (*UTC*, 167). Later, as the narrative shows, Taylor himself enters open rebellion and takes the lead of his people to march against dispossession:

A fat black woman elbowed her way in and faced him.  
‘Waal, Reveren, we done got beat up. Now, is we gonna march?’  
‘Yuh wanna march?’ asked Taylor.  
‘Yeah; soon as the crowd gits together,’ said Taylor [...].  
Taylor turned and walked across the yard with the crowd following.  
(*UTC*, 175)

Taylor’s final decision to march with the crowd reveals Wright’s vision of religion as a powerful tool when it is used to serve the cause of those who are oppressed. In other words, Wright advocates for the use of religion to address worldly issues but not supernatural ones<sup>156</sup>. This is made clear as the reader can see that when Taylor fervently invokes the wrath of his God to tear down the Establishment, nothing happens. Once he takes concrete actions by marching with his oppressed community, even the oppressor ends up recognizing their strength saying, “freedom belongs to the strong” (*UTC*, 187). Taylor’s dream of overcoming the oppressive Establishment comes true only when he shifts it from fantasy to action as is the case of Bigger who initially rebels in his fantasy before taking concrete actions.

Even if Bigger Thomas acts as a conformist in the presence of Whites, he does not hesitate to denounce social and economic injustices and to protest against landlords taking rental fees for poor quality houses as the following dialogue reveals:

‘Kinda warm today.’  
‘Yeah,’ Gus said.  
‘You get more heat from this sun than from them old radiators at home.’  
‘Yeah; them old white landlords sure don’t give much heat.’  
‘And they always knocking at your door for money.’  
‘I’ll be glad when summer comes.’  
‘Me too’, Bigger said. (*NS*, 24)

Bigger Thomas and others who share the same socio-economic category have no future prospects and must be content with socio-economic inequalities without flinching at the risk of being sanctioned by the Establishment. However, Bigger succeeds in challenging the socio-economic status quo in his fantasies and makes real what is impracticable in real life. This

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<sup>156</sup> Wright is convinced that Blacks cannot end oppression through inactive spirituality. Religion is only viable when it is used as a political weapon against oppression. That is why Taylor’s curses against Whites do not bear any significant results in terms of rocking Blacks’ oppression. It is not until he accepts to march with the oppressed that solace comes and relieves his community’s hunger. By the same token, Horvath contends that Wright believes the Black Church can never make the end of black oppression a reality as it lacked political dimension (Horvath 10), which is corroborated by Sue in *Uncle Tom’s Children*. It is not until she turns her faith into action that she can help oppressed people achieve freedom, even though she loses her life in this quest.

highlights Wright's intention to show that even though the Establishment has control, those who are deprived can still find tricks to protest and achieve their goals and their imagination is a helpful tool. In this respect, Richard and his comrades play the engineers in *Black Boy* like Bigger and Gus play the captain and car-owners in *Native Son*. Bigger dreams of flying a plane, which typifies a challenge of the socio-economic status quo. Since flying a plane is booked for the wealthy, in wanting to fly, Bigger projects to challenge wealthy people's privilege and authoritative position through his fantasies. But to make it true, he needs to fight against his poverty first.

The fight against poverty by obtaining decent jobs, which according to the socio-economic Establishment is the prerogative of those who own the means of production, remains a strong insignia of non-conformism in Wright's characters. Any attempt to get out of poverty is seen as threatening the supremacy of the white majority, which reminds the reader of the whipping bosses who exploited Black American workers, making of them what Douglas A. Blackmon called "slaves by another name" (Blackmon, 2008). In *Slavery by another Name*, Blackmon points to the lingering slavery-like exploitative system in post-slavery American economy. While the system excluded Black Americans from well-paid jobs, it contradictorily forbade them joblessness, which obliged them to take menial jobs to escape arrest. Failure to find a job, however menial it could be, was deemed vagrancy and punished by the law, as shows Green Cottenham's story (on which Blackmon's work was built). Green Cottenham was a young black man who was arrested in County Shelby, Alabama, and charged for vagrancy because of his refusal to take menial jobs while Whites occupied all well-paid ones. According to Blackmon, Cottenham's story revealed the persistence of American racial discriminatory system after slavery:

Cottenham had committed no crime; vagrancy, the offense of a person not being able to work to prove at a given moment that he or she is employed, was a new and flimsy concoction dredged up from legal obscurity at the end of the nineteenth century by the state legislatures of Alabama and other southern states. [...] Cottenham's offense was blackness. (Blackmon 1)

In *Native Son*, Bigger's mother urging him to work for Mr. Dalton is certainly meant to avoid her son being arrested and charged for vagrancy like Green Cottenham. This scene highlights Wright's denouncement of American economic discrimination. As a matter of fact, Wright was doubtlessly aware that Black-White relation in the United States was strongly dependent of economic power.

One of the best ways to keep Blacks in subservience was to keep them in poverty by discriminating them from white-collar-jobs while showing too little sympathy for them, convincing themselves that it was their fault if they were poor and criminals, just as Blackmon suggests: “Sympathy for the victims [Blacks], however brutally they have been abused, was tempered because, after all, they were criminals” (5). Wright rose up against this situation and shows it in *Black Boy* through Richard who challenges every family or white impediment to look for a well-paid job instead of relying on benefactors. Wright’s denouncement of Blacks’ economic precariousness also transpires through *Native Son*. Indeed, Bigger’s mother forcing him to take on a job as a driver to avoid vagrancy is, to some extent, a form of socio-economic non-conformism to the joblessness which confines Blacks to a role of needy (NS, 21). Self-employment or white-collar-job is seen as a valid weapon against the socio-economic Establishment but since it is forbidden for the poor, who are condemned to work for the rich, some of Wright’s characters fall into another form of rebellion which consists of stealing.

In *Native Son* Bigger, Gus and Jack plan to rob a white man’s shop, which is an expression of non-conformism to socio-economic laws requiring everyone to eat by the sweat of their brows. Bigger and his comrades’ plan to rob Blum’s Delicatessen is a challenging of wealthy people’s economic position or taboo. As the narrative clearly shows, in the minds of the burglars they do not differentiate between Blacks and Whites, for there are Blacks as well as Whites among dispossessors. Moreover, despite their belonging to the black community, the narrative tells us that they started robbing Blacks, who are easier targets to hit, before attacking white people:

They had always robbed Negroes. They felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people, for they knew that white policemen really never searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes [...]. They had the feeling that the robbing of Blum would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world’s rule over them; a challenge that they yearned to make, but were afraid to. (NS, 23)

Even though the fact of robbing Blacks remains an act of courage, attacking Whites is even more an act of bravery and challenge of the all-powerful white socio-economic force. Having said that, the will and the excitement to be able to violate white socio-economic supremacy feeds Bigger and his comrades’ theft intentions, just as it is the case with Richard in *Black Boy*.

Richard’s very first attempts at theft are not necessarily motivated by his desire not to be conquered by hunger. Richard refuses to be fed by benefactors as he has become a grown-up. Refusing to be fed by a benefactor increases his hunger to such an extent that he ends up

indulging in stealing. His first act of stealing is his stealing bread at Uncle Hoskins's house. Yet, he initially refuses to steal because he knows Whites want Blacks to be stealers to remain locked into this stereotype. The reader is made to understand that when the narrative asserts:

The southern whites would rather have had Negroes who stole, work for them than Negroes who knew, however dimly, the worth of their own humanity. Hence, whites placed a premium upon black deceit; they encouraged irresponsibility; and their rewards were bestowed upon us blacks in the degree that we could make them feel safe and superior. (*BB*, 219)

It is clear from this excerpt that Wright points to what I already developed earlier, namely that Black-White relationship is strongly dependent of economic power and as this excerpt shows, Whites prefer Blacks who steal and work for them to keep their feeling of superiority intact. In this respect, making Richard initially refuse to steal is Wright's form of non-conformism to white willingness. Actually, Wright wants to achieve what is forbidden to Black Americans, namely self-consciousness and dignity<sup>157</sup> (Wilhite 112), and we are made to understand it when Richard asserts in *Black Boy*: "I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation's capital had striven to keep out of Negro life. I was starting to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools said were taboo" (*BB*, 169). In other words, Wright wants to show how poor Blacks can put on a gloss of respectability and fight for a living without falling into social scourges like crooking or stealing. Put otherwise, through Richard's initial reluctance at stealing, Wright wants to assert the dignity of Blacks in a society that could not recognize them worthy citizens.

However, Richard realizes that to steal or not to steal does not change his socio-economic situation because of the Jim Crow laws that are tailor-made to keep him in a state of dependency. Indeed, at the time *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* were set, American socio-economic and political context was marked by outrageous materialism and Jim Crow laws which respectively delved the poor and the rich, Blacks and Whites into what could be called Deleuzean chaos. For Deleuze and Guattari,

What characterizes chaos, indeed, is less the absence of determinations than the infinite speed with which they take shape and vanish: It is not a movement of one to another, but rather the impossibility of relationship between two determinations, because one

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<sup>157</sup> If Wright initially makes his protagonist in *Black Boy* refuse to steal, it is because he rejects the criminal ideology imposed on Blacks. Keith Whilite asserts that "Wright dreams of what the state has branded wrong for the Negro" (112). That is why when Shorty, who abides by the criminal ideology, asks Richard to throw away his pride and practice criminal acts, he resists doing so and even repulses his subservient behavior. It is not until he convinces himself that criminal acts finally are not a violation of his own ethics but that of Whites that he indulges in stealing to get money for his flight to the North so as to escape the socio-economic Establishment of the South.

cannot appear unless the other has already disappeared [...] <sup>158</sup>. (Deleuze, Guattari, 1999, 44-45)

In the context of American materialism and Jim Crow laws, poor Blacks and wealthy Whites live in this chaos as the two racial entities or social classes cannot stand in the same space without it resulting in the disappearance of either of them. Wright makes this reality clearer in the three novels under study. For instance, Bobo's, Sue's, Hoskins's respective encounters with Whites in the same physical space do not result in their self-determination but rather in their lynching. Similarly, Bigger's encounter with the white girl, Mary, results in the former killing the latter. Through such murderous encounters, Wright sets up to show that the black subject can never find a way out of the American materialism and Jim Crow laws he never seized to indict. As long as these two socio-economic and political systems persist, whatever their self-consciousness, intelligence and hard work to climb up the socio-economic ladder, there always will be, to borrow words from Deleuze, "impossibility of relationship" between Blacks and Whites who, "in infinite speed," will repress them down to a state of dependency and self-worthlessness. As a result, Richard finally resolves to steal, breaking then the laws, because he "no longer felt bound by the laws which white and blacks were supposed to obey in common. [He] was outside those laws; the white people had told [him] so" (*BB*, 220).

While the theft of food does not guarantee Richard's survival in the context of dispossession, he decides to take it up a notch by stealing money. This time, however, stealing encapsulates an existential connotation. Indeed, if Richard steals, he will get a chance to escape northward away from the brutality of the socio-economic frame of the South. Stealing becomes Wright's projection of his own protest against Jim Crow laws and ethics so as to move from dispossession to repossession. This existential approach to theft is influenced by the socio-economic context of the United States at a time when the dispossession of poor minorities was erected into a form of governance as it was legalized by the Jim Crow Laws. In the same vein, Johnson explains that "literary creation [...] is dependent of the socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic conditions in which the writer evolves" <sup>159</sup> (Johnson 286). Therefore, for him, theft is the symbol of "protest against the system, [...] a questioning of property relations" (288), since only one part of society owns everything and the other owns nothing, all of which is corroborated by Richard in *Black Boy*: "Therefore, I reasoned, stealing was not a violation of

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<sup>158</sup> « Ce qui caractérise le chaos, en effet, c'est moins l'absence de déterminations que la vitesse infinie avec laquelle elles s'ébauchent et s'évanouissent : ce n'est pas un mouvement de l'une à l'autre, mais au contraire l'impossibilité d'un rapport entre deux déterminations, puisque l'une n'apparaît pas sans que l'autre ait déjà disparu [...]. »

<sup>159</sup> « La création littéraire [...] est fonction des conditions socio-culturelles, socio-politiques et socio-économiques dans lesquelles évolue l'écrivain. »

my ethics, but of his; I felt that things were rigged in his favor and any action I took to circumvent his scheme of life was justified” (*BB*, 223).

Theft can be revolutionary when it has to allow the thief to change social relations and change daily precarious situations (Johnson 288), and it is certainly this philosophy that drives Richard in *Black Boy* when he finally decides to steal. In their postcolonial theories, Aschroft (2001) and Bhabha (1994) range stealing and other acts of juvenile delinquency among sub-culture designed to indirectly oppose the oppressor’s domination. Crime is, therefore, a form of resistance and according to Aschroft and Bhabha, it is not solely all about direct confrontation. “Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention nor is it the simple negation or the exclusion of the content of another culture” (Bhabha 24). It is rather a “challenging of hegemonic regimes through subtle means rather than direct confrontation” (Makombe 293), and some of the ways to challenge the hegemonic regime is minor crimes such as theft, crooking and lying to the employer.

Dispossession puts minorities into what could be called social determinism as they are locked in daily precariousness due to unemployment which leads to extreme poverty. Worse, the dominant group has worked to establish this situation as the social and economic norm, making of the dominated an exclusively dependent group. Wright protested against this socio-economic circus which tends to convince those who are deprived that they have no chance or a way out of unemployment and poverty. To achieve his goal, he built characters in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* who embody and illustrate his refusal to conform to existing socio-economic norms. Richard in *Black Boy*, although coming from a relatively poor family, denies his father’s heritage as a poor person and shows that they were victims of social determinism which he intends to break through self-creation (Hakutani, 1985). And even though he fails to break social determinism in the real world, he does make it happen in his imaginary world:

Everything was possible, likely, feasible, because I wanted everything to be possible [...]. Because I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen within. Because my environment was bare and bleak, I endowed it with unlimited potentialities, redeemed it for the sake of my own hungry and cloudy yearning. (*BB*, 64)

Just like Richard who refuses to be overwhelmed by social determinism, Hoskins refuses to conform to the socio-economic status quo marked by maintaining the rich and the poor in their respective social categories without the possibility of change. Thus he challenges the taboo or the myth of the poor and tearful black man in the streets hoping to meet a humanistic benefactor, and elbows his way into the business world in violation of the unwritten rules prescribing that

he must stay in poverty and rely on food aid as many characters in *Uncle Tom's Children* do. By working hard and succeeding in making his business flourish, Hoskins has set foot in a category reserved for the ruling class, which costs him his life since he is assassinated by men holding the monopoly of socio-economic success which they jealously safeguard.

Despite Hoskins's assassination due to his flourishing business, Richard decides to follow in his footsteps by seeking to learn and gain professional employment as the optical shop scene shows (*BB*, 207). By wanting to learn a skilled job, Richard intends to resist the economic dispossession of Whites (Maaloum 114) and to attain economic and social independence. Protesting against the socio-economic status quo truly remains a common thread in Wright's writing in general and in the three works under study in particular. Richard's willingness to work at the optical shop as a qualified man, despite Pease and Reynolds's warnings, is a threat to white supremacy and stereotypical view of him. Through his unconventional characters, Wright shakes the oppressive socio-economic structure to reveal all its odds and as Derrida (1967) contends, "one can threaten the structure to better perceive it"<sup>160</sup> (13). Wright shakes the white dominant structure with characters like Big Boy, Bobo, Lester, Bigger and Richard and permits the reader to perceive its dangerousness when its foundations or privileges are threatened. One can only perceive its harming capacities when it is threatened and, indeed, we are made to understand it through Bobo and Bigger meeting death in venturing into the white dominant space and power respectively represented by the swimming pool and the Daltons. Long before the publication of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* which reveal the quest for socio-economic well-being against all odds, some characters in *Uncle Tom's Children* had already subscribed to this logic. Such is, for example, the case of Silas who ignores the socio-economic Jim Crowist standards so as to find a place in the business arena (Caron 54). As Jay Delmar concurs, Silas is obsessed by climbing the social ladder and compete with the upper class: "Silas is determined to beat the white bourgeoisie at its own game, and by following the grasping rules of the commercial power structure, [...] economic success became Silas's only goal, the weapon with which he could defeat those whom he always hated" (Delmar 8).

While minorities are presupposed to remain in social determinism, Silas challenges this presupposition and becomes economically stable, an economic stability which makes him too proud in the eyes of members of the dominant group who will cause his death thereafter (8). Even though Delmar deplores Silas's individualistic quests which make him ignore his wife Sarah's emotional needs, he recognizes him as courage personified as he succeeds in equaling

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<sup>160</sup> « On peut menacer la structure pour mieux la percevoir. »



Whites through material possession<sup>161</sup> (Delmar 7). Since material possession is preserved by the dominant class, Silas's movement from dispossession to possession is an act of non-conformism to the prevailing socio-economic Establishment. One can still remember the scene where a member of the socio-economic Establishment comes to Silas's room while he is away. Besides abusing Silas's wife, he pretends to sell him his graphophone. Upon returning home, Silas smashes it on the ground and picks a grudge against his wife before confronting the white salesman (*UTC*, 116-125). By smashing the graphophone on the ground, it is the whole rigged socio-economic Establishment, which "never gives [him] a chance, takes his lan[d], takes his freedom, takes his woman, takes his life" (*UTC*, 125), that he smashes down so as to gain his own material possession.

Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* really set the tone for rebellion against the prevailing socio-economic Establishment where the oppressed remain oppressed and the oppressors continue to oppress. In Wright's philosophy oppressed people must have their own ethics and he sets the ethics that the oppressed should adopt in a context of oppression (Shelby 516). To Wright, sustainable non-conformism to oppose socio-economic inequalities was essential. Blacks should rebel and exceed the socio-economic boundaries imposed on them by Whites just as Silas and Hoskins respectively do in *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy* (517). Even though refusing to conform can entail such devastating consequences as Silas's and Hoskins's deaths, the dominated group must proudly stand together against their oppressors as Sue defies Whites by refusing to denounce her son Johnny-Boy (520). Such a behavior can lead to socio-economic reforms. But since any reform movement encounters the reluctance of privileged groups, only in solidarity and stubbornness can the oppressed group achieve reform (524-525). From a Wrightean point of view, this reform should consist in overthrowing the capitalist system of materialism by communism.

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<sup>161</sup> The basic criticism levied against Silas in *Uncle Tom's Children* is his own blindness to his wife Sarah's emotional loneliness which drags her to fall into the salesman's hands (Delmar 6). The search for economic possession to get out of poverty and, meanwhile, to prove his worth to Whites, makes of Silas a mad worker who finally forgets that a woman needs her husband's presence, attention and tenderness to feel emotionally secure (5-8). However, at the end of the day, Silas's merits in terms of breaking the economic status quo cannot be denied as, much like his namesake Silas Hoskins in *Black Boy*, he has succeeded in getting through in terms of material possession.

## 2. Resisting Dispossessing Capitalism with Communism

As part of his class theory, Karl Marx argues that societies are divided into several classes according to social, economic and political affiliation. The point of origin of Marx's theory lies in its division of society into two large essential groups: The bourgeois class which owns the means of production or capital and the proletarian class or labor force which works to feed the capital without being provided any share proportional to their workload. In such circumstances, there naturally occurs diametrically opposed interests between the capitalist and the laborer as Marx made it clearer:

A rapid growth of the capital is synonymous with a rapid growth of profit. Profits can grow rapidly only when the price of labor, the relative wages, decrease as just rapidly. Relative wages may fall, although real wages rise simultaneously with nominal wages, with the money value of labor, provided only that the real wage does not rise in the same proportion as the profit. If for instance, in good business years, wages rise five per cent while profits rise thirty per cent, the proportional, the relative wage has not increased, but decreased. If, therefore, the income of the worker increases with the rapid growth capital, there is at the same time a widening of the social chasm that divides the worker from the capitalist, an increase of the power of capital over labor, a greater dependence of labor upon capital. To say that 'the worker has interest in the rapid growth of capital,' means only this; that the more speedily the worker augments the wealth of the capitalist, the larger will be crumbs which fall to him, the greater will be the number of workers that can be called into existence, the more can the mass of slaves dependent on capital be increased. We have just seen that even in the most favorable situation for the working class, namely the most rapid growth of capital, however much it may improve the material life of the worker, does not abolish the antagonism between his interest and the interest of the capitalist. (Marx, 1976, 39)

Marx's landmark description of the capitalistic system really triggers the feeling of injustice in the proletarians who must organize themselves to reverse the balance of power in their favor. This is called proletarian revolution (Marx, 1938). Despite its reputation as a great democracy where freedom and equality are sacred principles, American society does not escape from Marx's class division since it is also characterized by the existence of the two conflicting classes Marx defines in his *Capital*. This is because, as Addison (2009) suggests, the capital holders have been able to control even the biggest democracies in the world so much that they are out of their control<sup>162</sup>. On the contrary, they have even been able to control democracies in a way

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<sup>162</sup> In his book review published in the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, John Addison's analysis permits to understand that the holders of the capital have become so powerful that they have great influence on the public power which is supposed to regulate the market so as to keep the stronger from crashing down the weaker. The holders of the capital even control democratic countries' leaders as they significantly contribute to their elections through clandestine campaign financing. In such circumstances, the whole democratic system falls prey to the capital which escapes from democratic control. In a related vein, Stevis and Boswell warn that "Capital's greatest

that one can contend where there is democracy, there is no socio-economic equality, which is corroborated by US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis when he blatantly declared: “We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, but we cannot have both” (Brandeis in Fuentes-Niva and Gallaso 2).

Not surprisingly, Marx’s theory influenced the development of many research fields ranging from social sciences to literary creations and criticism. In the domain of literature particularly, writers from oppressed peoples around the world used Marxism as an ideological tool to carve their works of art. One of them was Richard Wright whose early literary creations were strongly influenced by the Marxist ideology. Wright’s stay in Chicago and his militancy in the Communist Party in the United States of America (CPUSA) taught him how to transport Marxism into the literary sphere to fight for his oppressed community. Whether in *Uncle Tom’s Children* or *Native Son*, Wright sets to advocate for a long-standing questioning of the American capitalistic system with non-conformist attitudes until there is a reversal of class relations permitting proletarians to definitely get out of dispossession and reach possession. The oppressive dealings of capitalism with poor people is projected in the three novels under study. *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* serve as communist springboards for Wright to trigger the rebellion of the dominated and dispossessed who are faced with the outrageous exploitation of the ruling class (Mu’ in 59). In *Uncle Tom’s Children* particularly, all the short stories are replete with communist protagonists struggling to reverse power relations between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Although in *Native Son*, the protagonist Bigger is not a communist, he has got strong relations with communists such as Max, Mary and Jan who are all fighting to end exploitation, dispossession and oppression with the aim of allowing dispossessed people like Bigger to repossess their right to property and worthy life.

Having become aware of their belonging to a dominated and exploited socio-economic class, the dispossessed enter into rebellion to fight against the exploiting capitalistic system. For Wright, although the existence of the proletarian class remains a fact, it is not until its members become aware of their status and the historical role they must play that they can change their situation (Tolentino 383). While arguing in “How Bigger Was Born” that there are millions of Biggers all around the world, Wright believes in internationally-solidary class consciousness which will address dispossession as a whole (390). Put otherwise, Bigger is a poor black boy dispossessed and oppressed by the dominant class. So, if there are millions of Biggers in the world, this means oppression is worldwide and, therefore, requires all oppressed

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success has been its ability to create space within which it can operate without democratic supervision” (In Addison 449). For more on capitalism, see Karl Marx’s *The Capital* (1938).

people around the world to grow international awareness and stand together against oppression just as communists suggest. One can still remember Marx's landmark assertion: "Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a few time. The real fruits of their battle lies, not in the immediate result, but in ever expanding union of the workers" (Marx, Engels, 1969, 100). To achieve unity, Wright suggests proletarians must ignore the pressures and dangers that international class awareness could trigger as Richard does in *Black Boy*:

In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me has said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed. Somewhere in the dead of southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air. (*BB*, 187)

This excerpt allows us to understand the type of proletarian awareness that Wright offers to the oppressed. It is the one that heads straight for freedom despite the warning red lights, the screams and the ringing bells of the dominant class intended to keep them from reaching their objective. On this path to liberation strewn with pitfalls, the dispossessed cannot count on the goodwill of dispossessors since the liberation of the proletarian class is tantamount to the disappearance of the bourgeois class which relies exclusively on the labor force of the proletariat to perpetuate itself. That is to say the bourgeoisie has no interest in seeing the proletariat modify this status. On the contrary, since the perpetuation of the proletariat is an existential matter for the bourgeoisie, the latter will use all means to counter any inclinations to rebellion or revolution. That is why Wright advocates for a collective awareness of the dispossessed as proletarians to take their real place in society by freeing themselves from alienating labor and dependence.

Work, as a general rule, is supposed to liberate man but in such a context, the bourgeoisie liberates itself through the work of proletarians, while for the latter, work does not liberate them but rather keeps them in a state of dependence as can be understood in the case of Griggs in *Black Boy*. Griggs works in his boss's hotel but still cannot meet his basic needs, which forces him to demean himself before the bourgeoisie, represented by the white man, by playing the idiot to get some money. The presence in this scene of Richard, who sensitizes Griggs against this practice, reflects Wright's desire to educate proletarians on their strength in order to get them out of alienating labor and plunge them into liberating labor. This idea has already been put forward in *Native Son* through Bigger Thomas who ends up killing Mary, the daughter of a bourgeois. By killing Mary, it is the bourgeois capitalistic system that is

symbolically targeted, which reflects Wright's will to show the proletarians' ability to reach the capitalistic system despite the spatial separatism that is established between them. This spatial separatism between the rich and the poor does not prevent Gus and Bigger to play white or bourgeois and psychologically step into the realm of the capital holders:

'This is J.P. Morgan Speaking,' Gus said. 'Yes Sir, Mr. Morgan,' Bigger said; his eyes filled with mock adulation and respect. 'I want you to send twenty thousand shares of U.S. Steel in the market this morning,' Gus said. 'At what price, suh?' Bigger asked. 'Aw just damp them at any price,' Gus said with casual irritation. 'We holding too much.' I bet that's just the way they talk,' Gus said. 'I wouldn't be surprised,' Bigger said. (NS, 19)

In his micro-analysis of the same scene, Ellis explains that playing white is symptomatic of the fact that Blacks are put out of what Whites can earn and do. Their playing white is a psychological defiance of white authority, which will finally happen with Bigger killing Mary (Ellis 187, 189). "In effect, their scrutinizing rendition of white make authority [...] function as a form of mimicry in which Bigger and Gus question, oppose, and ultimately attempt to subvert [...] second class citizenship" (188). In a related vein, Farah Griffin asserts that "The closest he [Bigger] gets to holding the power of the white man [or the bourgeois] is through this game, and yet inherent in the game is the critique of white people" (Griffin 125) who epitomize the bourgeoisie. Wright brutally and virulently protested against the bourgeoisie by making himself the spokesperson for the voiceless without minding the moral hindrance it can provoke for this class. By the way, Wright's virulent writing against oppression was sometimes viewed as literary warmongering, which he rejected altogether:

I was sometimes defined as a committed writer. Personally, I do not see myself as a 'crusading writer.' I do imagine the shock that my words can provoke. The facts that we, as black writers, have to deal with are not always pleasant. If we deal with these facts in a brutal and direct way, they can have an electrifying and often demoralizing effect on people, and sometimes look like an attack. That's why I always strive to keep a sense of proportion in my books. I strive to assess what the readers can take in without feeling I am exaggerating<sup>163</sup>. (Wright in *L'Express*, 1960)

Wright refuses to be viewed as a warmonger simply because of his straightforward and uncompromising style of writing. Although lambasting oppression can sometimes be disturbing

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<sup>163</sup> « On m'a souvent défini comme un écrivain engagé. Personnellement, je ne me considère pas comme un "crusading writer", je m'imagine très bien le choc que peuvent créer chez autrui les choses que je dis. Les faits que nous avons à mentionner, nous autres écrivains noirs, ne sont pas toujours roses. Si nous en parlons d'une façon brutale et très directe, ils peuvent avoir sur autrui une influence parfois électrisante et parfois démoralisante, et peuvent parfois prendre l'aspect d'une attaque. C'est pourquoi je m'efforce de garder toujours une juste mesure dans mes livres. Je m'efforce d'apprécier ce que les lecteurs sont capables d'ingurgiter sans avoir l'impression que j'exagère. »

for the dominant class, it is simply a sad reality that Wright is not ready to stop denouncing in his own ways. Wright does not really think he is pushing too far; rather he sees oppression and depicts it the way it is without exaggerating.

Wright presented himself as the spokesperson for the proletarian class and used *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* as his means of expression. He describes with pragmatism the suffering of Blacks to arouse their revolt and make them aware the revolution Marx develops in his *Capital* is a possibility. Whether in *Uncle Tom's Children* or *Native Son*, Wright shows the reality that American society is undeniably made up of bourgeois and proletarians, the former using all the means at their disposal to maintain themselves in social and economic power to the detriment of the poor. Although violence is used by the police, the instrument of repression of the bourgeoisie, and by mobs to keep proletarians in their place, one can see that they still manage to organize themselves and act to repossess their deprived rights. This is reflected in the short stories of *Uncle Tom's Children*.

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, despite the use of public force, symbolized by the mayor and the sheriff, to intimidate dispossessed proletarians against their anti-capitalist march, they persist and succeed in organizing a gigantic march in which Whites and Blacks without distinction of race participate and make the bourgeoisie balk at their refusal to provide them with social assistance. It is particularly interesting to note the participation of Whites alongside Blacks because it highlights the paramount possibility of racial harmony through proletarian solidarity and demonstrates once again that Wright's work cannot be reduced to the simple question of race. This is arguably what motivates Sarah D. Scotland to suggest that Wright's works transcend color issues to tackle black as well as white prejudice (Scotland 3). In other words, Scotland suggests that Wright's work is not locked into constant whites-against-blacks opposition. Rather, it manifests some kind of humanism which requires "sympathy for the disinherited and oppressed that transcends difference in color and that would condemn blacks and white prejudice" (3). Indeed, Scotland's analysis is corroborated by Wright as he reaffirmed his rejection of racial definitions: "Race is not my homeland [...]. I am a human being before being black [...]. I stand against any racial definition [...]. I would not like whoever in the world we live in to stand from a racial perspective, be he white, black or yellow"<sup>164</sup> (Wright in

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<sup>164</sup> « La couleur n'est pas ma patrie. Je suis un être humain avant d'être un Américain ; je suis un être humain avant d'être un Noir et si je traite des problèmes raciaux, c'est parce que ces problèmes ont été créés sans mon consentement, sans ma permission. Je suis opposé à toute définition raciale. Si j'écris sur les problèmes raciaux, c'est précisément pour mettre fin aux définitions raciales. Et je ne souhaite pas que qui que ce soit dans le monde où nous vivons se place à un point de vue racial, qu'il soit blanc, noir ou jaune. »

*L'Express*, 1960). These words suggest the universal awareness of proletarians and demonstrate the revolutionary results that they can achieve when they act together. However, it should be noted that Wright brought a small reform to the Marxist vision of society.

The Marxist theory aims at a total upheaval of society in order to reverse the relations of domination. It is all about proletarians overthrowing their bourgeois bosses in order to establish what can be called proletarian dictatorship. Wright's works, however, do not necessarily advocate for the establishment of proletarian dictatorship. All Wright advocates through the three works is the disappearance of social class and the advent of a classless world where all citizens are equal and free and have the same opportunities for access to happiness. In that world, none of the children will any longer be pinpointed as Uncle Tom's children but rather as native sons enjoying the same rights and duties in their native land, a land where work no longer alienates (Johnson, 2007). In that world, private property also remains a threat to the collective happiness of society.

One of the features of capitalism is what one might call the cult of private property which has enabled a minority holding the means of production to seize the entire capital and enjoy the social welfare that it provides. Capitalism makes it possible for the rich to exploit the poor without the latter being able to attain social welfare by their labor. Such an unfair sharing of production has always resulted in socio-economic antagonisms for years. These antagonisms are common to human history and served as the basis for shaping the Marxist view of society as Marx and Engels show it:

The free man and slave, practitioner and plebeian, baron and serf, master of jurande and companion, in a word oppressors and oppressed in constant opposition, waged an uninterrupted struggle, sometimes open, sometimes dissimulated, a struggle which always ended, either by a revolutionary transformation of society as a whole, or by the disappearance of the two classes in struggle. [...] The history of any society has been so far made up of class antagonisms which, depending on the era, have taken different forms. However, whatever form these antagonisms took, the exploitation of one part of society by the other has been a common fact over the centuries<sup>165</sup>. (Marx, Engels 30)

As Marx and Engels suggest, exploitation is a historical human pattern. There has always been the proletariat and the bourgeoisie which are in constant struggle. In a related vein, Johnson asserts, "from slavery America to the contemporary period, these two races [Blacks and

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<sup>165</sup> « L'homme libre et esclave, praticien et plébéien, baron et serf, maître de jurande et compagnon, en un mot oppresseurs et opprimés en opposition constante ont mené une lutte ininterrompue, tantôt ouverte, tantôt dissimulée, une lutte qui finissait toujours, soit par une transformation révolutionnaire de la société toute entière, soit par la disparition des deux classes en lutte. [...] L'histoire de toute société jusqu'à nos jours était faite d'antagonismes de classes, antagonismes qui, selon les époques, ont revêtu des formes différentes. Mais quelle ait été la forme revêtue par ces antagonismes, l'exploitation d'une partie de la société par l'autre, est un fait commun à tous les siècles passés. »

Whites], which have been transformed into social classes by circumstances of economic production, have always got conflicting relationship in terms of class interests” (Johnson 335). However, if the exploitation of the labor of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie appears natural, it is all the more so for proletarians to fight in order to put an end to what could be called the bourgeoisie’s privatization of socio-economic welfare, a goal which, according to communism, can only be achieved in a communist society. This idea of communist society is pictured in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son* to pervert the exaggerated promotion of capitalism which allows a handful of individuals to socially enjoy the labor power of the toiling masses. Here again, Wright proposes a questioning of this system by concrete actions. These concrete actions consist in violating the private property of the bourgeoisie as a demand for social equality. This is exactly what Big Boy and his comrades in *Uncle Tom’s Children* do when they violate Jim’s private property by going for a swim in his pool without being invited. Worse, this adventure creates an incident where, in wanting to defend the inviolability of his private property, Jim is killed by the young proletarians. Symbolically, Jim’s death signifies the death of private property and, so to speak, of capitalism, a goal so dear to communists.

Work is supposed to liberate man instead of alienating him as is the case in the capitalistic system. In this system workers live in difficult working conditions with no income but rather wages paid just to renew their workforce. In this context Engels, in his synopsis of Marx’s theory, talks about labor-power which is brought by the capitalist as a commodity. “The value of labor-power is only the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of his power. His maintenance includes the means of subsistence of his substitutes, i.e. his children, in order that the race of these peculiar commodity owners may perpetuate itself” (Engels 16). In clearer terms, the laborer does not have any share in the surplus-value he produces for the capitalist. He is just paid the necessary money to renew his physically indispensable means of subsistence and that of his offspring which is viewed as future labor force to be exploited.<sup>166</sup> In such circumstances, the first forms of rebellion of proletarian workers consist in sabotaging the tools of work or in stealing the capital. This reality could be observed in American society at the time Wright’s three works were set and was particularly manifested in a high rate of Blacks’ stealing. Stealing from a Marxist perspective can be seen as a way for Blacks, who belong to the proletariat or working class, to contest the capitalistic socio-economic system so as to snatch their share of the national production. Wright projects this reality in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. In *Native Son*, Bigger’s job does not allow him to

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<sup>166</sup> For more on this, see Engel’s *Synopsis of Capital*, first published in 1868 and put on line in August, 2000.



properly care for his family. By way of protest against the capitalistic system which exploits his labor, he kills the daughter of his boss who is a powerful symbol of capitalism in *Native Son*. As if that were not enough, Bigger steals the money from his victim's purse before attempting to swindle more money from her parents through the ransom note. Likewise, proletarians begin their rebellion against the capitalistic system in *Black Boy* with theft and swindling. Even Richard, the honest and dignified protagonist, eventually becomes convinced of the need to indulge in this practice. So, he uses the trust his boss gives him to steal money from entrance tickets together with other exploited and dispossessed workers, despite a strict Adventist education received from his mother Ella and grandmother Granny.

In Wright's mind one of the most formidable means that exploitative capitalism can use to perpetuate its domination over proletarians without being noticed is religion. Indeed, capitalism does not manifest itself only in economic relations. To convince proletarians not to attempt any revolt, religion is an effective means used since it convinces faithful proletarians to be happy with their situation as being the result of an established divine order. That is why Marx said that religion is the opium of the people. Wright surely espoused this idea and as a well-informed and conscious proletarian, he deciphers this hidden form of domination that the bourgeoisie can exercise through religion. This consciousness is evidenced by *Uncle Tom's Children* where Wright suggests that the bourgeoisie is trying to use Reverend Dan Taylor as a tool or rampart to kill proletarians' protest in exchange for a few privileges. The mayor's words to Taylor reveals this suggestion:

After all, Dan, you and I have worked together in the past and I don't see why we cant work work together now. Ive backed you up in a lot of things, Dan. Ive backed you even when other white folks said you were wrong. [...] Dan, youre a leader and you've got great influence over your congregation here. [...] Dan, I helped you to get that influence by doing your people a lot of favors through you when you came into my office a number of times. [...] I'm asking you now to use that influence and tell your people to stay off the street tomorrow. (*UTC*, 151)

Still, communists manage to come between Taylor and the bourgeoisie and convince him of the need to use his religious status to achieve equality rather than oppression. At first, Dan Taylor works for the upper class, helping them contain the anger of the dispossessed. While doing so, he has lost sight of the fact that in this system, only the interests of the holders of the means of production count. Taylor finally learns it the hard way when he is beaten up by the young members of the bourgeoisie whom he considers to be his allies. A "whip lashed across his bare back, *whick!* He flinched and struggled against the rope that cut his wrists to the bone" (*UTC*, 162). As a result of such an inhuman treatment, Taylor definitely decides to side with the

communist protesters, obliging the “the mayor [to] turn and walk back” (*UTC*, 179), which signals the victory of communism.

In order to achieve communist victory as Wright projects in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, there needs to be an acute awareness of exploited groups. Literature is one of the effective ways to achieve that goal. In the American context of the 1940s onwards, the proletarian class was predominantly made up of Blacks and other minorities since “unemployment rates among nonwhites increased more than twice as much as among whites [...] and the proportion of Negroes employed in nonagricultural industries, particularly in manufacturing, decreased markedly” (Bedell 596). While Wright was a black writer, how could he convey his communist ideas against the bourgeoisie without his works being reduced to mere racial protest? The obvious solution for Wright was to build white characters who are responsible for transmitting communist ideology to underprivileged groups. In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Hardley and Green play this role well. They are white but work to convince a black pastor to join the principles of communism based on equality regardless of socio-economic or racial affiliation. “I am white and here I am quite ready to combat for the rights of yours” (*UTC*, 177), Hadley insists next to Taylor, the black pastor. But the bravest act lies behind a white lawyer, Max, accepting to defend against all odds a young black proletarian, Bigger Thomas.

Max’s action in *Native Son* deserves special attention in that the court scene concentrates in a single space all the stakeholders of the socio-political and economic dialectic, including the Bourgeoisie and Proletariat, to spark the debate on human relations. Max’s name is much telling about Wright’s proximity with Marxism. In fact, Wright creates a phonetic similitude between Max [mæks] and Marx [ma:ks], much like a minimal pair, to show the link between his character and Marxism and, indeed, as can be perceived through his plea, Max’s Marxist objective is clear: to convince the judge by the force of communist argumentation to grant indulgence to Bigger with a view to transform and restore him socially and, at the same time, defeat the capitalistic system. While the court claims to be judging Bigger, it is also the entire capitalistic system that Wright allows the reader to judge. All of Max’s pleading is to justify Bigger and his entire tumultuous existence. His first line of defense is to lay bare the oppressive American system throughout history. For him, Bigger’s murderous act can find its origins in historical exploitation that has turned falsehood into truth, abnormal into normal, and injustice into justice just to serve the selfish interests of the capitalistic system. Max argues vehemently:

If only ten or twenty Negroes had been put into slavery, we could call it injustice, but there were hundreds of thousands of them throughout the country. If this state of affairs had lasted for two or three years, we could say that it was unjust; but it lasted for more

than two hundred years. Injustice which lasts for three long centuries and which exists among millions of people over thousands of square miles of territory, is injustice no longer; it is an accomplished fact of life. (NS, 302-303)

Here, Max begins with castigating the American slavery system which produced Bigger and yet claims to be judging him on what it calls a crime. In some criminal issues, the criminal is a victim, that is, an innocent who is declared guilty<sup>167</sup> (Johnson, 2007). That is why Max questions the very notion of justice and demonstrates that injustice can become justice according to the balance of power. It is, therefore, the capitalistic society that defines what is right and judges and condemns those it considers unjust. Yet, what is considered unjust by the upper class turns out to be the desire for action of the Proletariat which is condemned in inaction.

In his “Crime and Punishment, the Assistant, and Native Son,” Robert Stanton leads his readers to perceive that Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, is a case in point of the poor boy confined to uselessness and inaction. He explains that Bigger has never been allowed to do what he wants to do; neither has he been allowed to be whom he wants to be, just as Wright himself was condemned to inaction in the United States and obliged flee to France to repossess actions. The bourgeoisie has kept Bigger from being a person and yet expects him to act according to their ethics and morals. For Stanton, the same ethics and morals exactly “confine him to shame-ridden non-existence by prohibiting any significant act, except crime” (Stanton 56). Crime from Stanton’s perspective, therefore, reveals Bigger’s willingness to possess his own ethics outside the social entity he is excommunicated from.

After setting the scene by denouncing the capitalistic justice system, Max brandishes the threat of a revolutionary uprising of the oppressed if bourgeois justice ventures to sentence Bigger to death:

This boy represents but a tiny aspect of a problem whose reality sprawls over a third of this nation. Kill him! Burn the life out of him! And still when the delicate and unconscious machinery of race relations slips, there will be murder again [...]. The surest way to make certain that there will be more such murders is to kill this boy. In your rage and guilt, make thousands of other black men and women feel that the barriers are tighter and higher! Kill him and swell the tide of pent-up lava that will someday break loose, not in a single, blundering, accidental, individual crime, but in a wild cataract of emotion that will brook no control. (NS, 303)

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<sup>167</sup> In his analysis of Fred Daniels’ robbery in Wright’s collection of short stories *Eight Men*, Johnson explains that in some cases, robbery cannot be considered as a purely criminal act without taking into account the social and economic context in which it takes place. Daniels practices robbery because he has been excluded from the socio-economic establishment. In such circumstances, condemning the robber is tantamount to condemning a guiltless person, because he/she does not rob out of a mere pleasure of questioning property relations, but rather out of necessity to question the discriminatory socio-economic establishment. In one word, from Johnson’s perspective, some people who are declared guilty are, in reality, guiltless (Johnson 288-289). For more on this, see Johnson Kouassi’s “L’Acte d’écrire et les symboles dans l’œuvre de Richard Wright” (2007).

Max's warning against bourgeois justice is clear: if Bigger is killed, that will spark off revolutionary potential which will lead to more crimes. In other words, this justice must face two choices: free Bigger while reforming the social system and have peace or sentence him to death and face violent proletarian revolution in the long term. Just as Marx did in his *Capital*, the whole meaning of Max's communist commitment in *Native Son* lies in his critique of the capitalistic socio-economic system which keeps the proletariat in poverty and the bourgeoisie in wealth, as he articulates:

The relationship between the Thomas family and the Dalton family is that of renter to landlord, customer to merchant, employee to employer. The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton family got rich. And Mr. Dalton, a decent man, tried to salve his feelings by giving money. But, my friend, gold was not enough! Corpses cannot be bribed! (*NS*, 304)

This excerpt sheds light on the entire Marxist conception of society that Wright invokes in his work. Marxism views society as a matter of work performed by the laborer or proletarians and the means of production controlled by the capitalists. The latter imposes ceaseless competition between the laborers to make labor cheaper and increase profit, a system which makes the wealthy capitalists wealthier and makes the poor laborers poorer. As Marx suggests,

The greater division of labor enables one laborer to accomplish the work of five, ten or twenty laborers; it therefore increases competition among the laborers fivefold, tenfold or twentyfold. The laborers compete not only by selling themselves one cheaper than the other, but also one doing the work of five, then ten, or twenty and they are forced to compete in this manner by the division of labor, which is introduced and steadily improved by capital. Furthermore [...] the special skill of the laborer becomes worthless. He becomes transformed into a simple monotonous force of production, with neither physical nor mental elasticity. (Marx, 1933, 44-45)

Marx's perspective reveals all the outrageous exploitation of the laborers by the holders of the means of production. The laborers are made to work more with cheaper wages, which finally makes their skill or labor worthless to them.

Wright projects this exploitative system in *Native Son* through Bigger who stands for the laborer torn between driving Mary to school, Mr. Dalton to town, and performing household chores, and Max who stands for the Marxist fighting to free him from alienation and death. In *Native Son*, Wright really depicts his fictional society as being made up of proletarians represented by the Thomas family, and bourgeois represented by Mr. Dalton who exploits Bigger while pretending to help him out of poverty. Yet, Max "repudiates this liberal-humanitarian approach based on sympathy" with poor minorities while not combating their

poverty structurally<sup>168</sup> (Elmer 791). By claiming that “corpses cannot be bribed” (*NS*, 304), Max does not mean the Thomas family is clinically dead. Rather, it is all about the social death of proletarians and the only way to resuscitate, socially speaking, goes through proletarians organizing themselves in big demonstrations without regard to race as Hadley and his communist-oriented friends are trying to do:

Weve covered the city with fifteen thousand leaflets. Weve contacted every organization we could think of, black and white. Call off this demonstration and let the folks stay hongry, er git as many as we kin together n go downtown in the mawnin. Ef we git five thousan down there the police wont bother us. [...] Im a white man and Im here willing to fight for your peoples rights! (*UTC*, 143-144).

Hardley’s words reveal the power of proletarians reside in their race-less coloration and their number. It is true that the bourgeoisie is pragmatically stronger with huge means of repression, but proletarians can still use the power of their number and racial diversity to win their cross-class battle and not only put an end to the working-hard-while-dying-with-hunger situation but also have every racial identity equally respected.

In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, one of the motives for the struggle of the oppressed and those who are dispossessed of their identity is to leap out of a no-identity status to regain a quite respectable identity. Through this title, Wright moved towards repossession. Indeed, the possessive case restores the children to Uncle Tom (the other name for America). Clearly put, it shows that the children in the novel belong to Uncle Tom (America) and, therefore, their struggle for American identity is quite natural. To achieve a respectable American identity, however, Blacks must stand together as the plural “children” suggests. In fact, the plural form underscores the idea of a group, as opposed to an individual. To reach collective freedom, not individual, resistance must be brought to the fore. *Uncle Tom’s Children* is also reminiscent of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. To some extent, by using “Children” instead of “Cabin”, it was a way for Wright to re-appropriate the American literary tradition or canon to offer a counter-perspective of post-slavery exploitation and to address a black male response to a white female writer. In this respect, contrary to the stereotypical *Uncle Tom’s Children* which complies with stereotypes, oppression and are devoid of any human agency, all the protagonists in Wright’s

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<sup>168</sup> In the history of the United States, white liberals fought hard to put an end to Blacks’ human bondage. Many of them showed pity and sympathy to the slaves and former slaves but failed to trigger significant structural reforms which could permit them to get out of racial and socio-economic impediments. Through *Native Son*, and Mr. Dalton particularly, Wright offers the impetus for denouncing such an attitude. While Mr. Dalton claims to help Bigger, he does not take any significant action, such as vocational training, to permit him to become economically independent. As Delmar explains, Wright stands against such sympathetic gestures, because what the slaves or the oppressed need is not sympathy, but concrete political actions permitting them to become free and integrate the socio-economic sphere. For more on this, see Jonathan Elmer’s “Spectacle and Event in *Native Son*” (1998).

*Uncle Tom's Children* engage in a merciless struggle against the dispossession of their identity and thus of social belongings. They are all focused on the combination of efforts to be stronger, because as the saying goes, "United we stand, divided we fall." Along the same lines, Gomez writes:

The first three stories carry a warning to the enemy (capitalists) [...] by highlighting some of the violent possibilities inherent in all relationships and warn Blacks about the ineffectiveness of pursuing individual actions. The implication being that only a communal movement based on an established (black communist) group identity has a chance of succeeding. (Gomez 36)

Here too, the strength of communism is much touted as the only alternative for the oppressed to free themselves from the capitalistic yoke and finally find their place in society. To do so, they must rebel against the system by breaking out of submission into intra-class expression and solidarity under all circumstances. Sue understands this principle so well that she refuses to hand over Johnny-Boy, a young communist, to popular capitalistic retribution. Despite all the pressure exerted by the sheriff who symbolizes the power of the bourgeoisie, she refuses to show where the much sought-after communist Johnny-Boy is hiding. When Johnny-Boy is finally flushed out and lugged into the bush to undergo lynching, Sue intervenes with a pistol to defend him. While she loses her life in trying to defend a communist, one is left to presume she is a martyr as though to suggest that the struggle for repossession sometimes requires proletarians to go as far as the supreme sacrifice, that is, death. Is it not what makes Gomez rave about communist achievements when he writes?

Although the story ends with the death of our heroine [Sue] and her son, there is an understood sense of accomplishment because the group is now stronger. It is composed of individuals who place its survival above their own, who have come to a communal identity through suffering and are autonomous individuals defined by their own principles and actions rather than those who seek to exploit them. (37-38)

Sue's death complies with the communist principles of communal life and solidarity and showcases Wright's intention to highlight all the difficulties surrounding such class unity. *Native Son* further highlights this difficulty lying behind class unity as Bigger himself is sentenced to death in spite of Max's brilliant plea to save his body and identity.

All lower-class characters in *Native Son* really suffer from the economic system which defines identity in terms of material possession. Ranging from Bigger's mother, Bigger himself to Bessie, they all bump into the huge economic power of the bourgeoisie which crashes any of their attempts to escape their assigned roles and to form an identity of their own allowing them to be integrated in the social model they live in. That is why Bigger and Gus, both members of

the proletarian class, fall into vagrancy and juvenile delinquency, a situation which, according to Marx, is provoked by capitalism: “The proletariat [...] were turned *en masse* into beggars, robbers, vagabonds, partly from inclination in most cases from stress of circumstances” (Marx, 1995). Gomez goes to the same direction, contending, “These characters live on the fringes of the capitalist system and are therefore denied the privilege of a social identity [...]. They are unable to have lives on their own because their days are taken up by the unending struggle for survival” (Gomez 40). By way of protest to social injustices which Gomez mentions, Bigger and his comrades sometimes plan robbing black and white merchants who have the means of production and enjoy all the exchange-value of the very riches they produce. Robbing Whites as well as Blacks highlights Wright’s raceless perspective on society. In fact, being black is not sufficient to escape Wright’s criticism and, indeed, he criticizes the black middle class who plays the capitalistic game by exploiting other Blacks, which Tolentino corroborates: “Indeed, for Wright, previous forms of black agency tended to serve the white and black bourgeoisie; he denounces, for example, the educated black middle class who used their privilege to align themselves with white bourgeoisie rather than to help poor blacks (Tolentino 386).

Wright’s Marxist philosophy does not take into account racial differences as being the cause of oppression and dispossession. Whether in *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, Wright focuses on the fact that Blacks as well as Whites are all prey to the capitalist system and one can understand this stance by taking a look into Mary’s and Bigger’s cases. There is a world of difference which the capitalist society has set between these two characters. Mary belongs to the bourgeoisie whereas Bigger is only a poor boy. In accordance with social separatism, even though Bigger is lucky enough to get in touch with Mary and her father Dalton, their relationship must strictly be that of “employee to employer” (*NS*, 304). Nevertheless, Wright breaks this class line and portrays Mary as a bourgeois desiring to discover Bigger’s social sphere, as to prove that beyond the social categories which keep them separate, Bigger and Mary share the same humanity (Johnson, 2014). The superiority of one class on the other is just a social construction of the bourgeois who intend to keep their privileges. But how can one account for the fact that Bigger kills Mary whereas they share the same humanity? According to Johnson,

The black man has fallen into a trap which keeps him in a deadlocked position as designed by the dominant and ruling force. And the role of the hero, the black man, consists in working out a plan already traced beyond his conscious control because he is aware and feels that his life has been built on the accumulation of historic wrongs, social and cultural prejudices of any kind. Whites’ behavior generates the black man’s

acts in the novel [*Native Son*], including physical criminality. Fear, hatred and the feeling of guilt are essential in this tragedy<sup>169</sup>. (Johnson 544-545)

Johnson makes it clear that Bigger's murder stems from social determinism unconsciously created by the dominant class in their quest for everlasting domination. As part of the poor group, Bigger has only played the role designed for him by society just as Richard explains in *Black Boy*:

We were now large enough for the white boys to fear us and both of us, the white boys and the black boys, began to play our traditional role as though we had been born to them, as though it was in our blood, as though we were being guided by instinct. All the frightful descriptions we had heard about each other, all the violent expressions of hate and hostility that had seeped into us from our surroundings, came now on surface to guide our actions [...]. Whenever we caught a white boy on our side we stoned him; if we strayed to their side, they stoned us. (*BB*, 93)

One is left to presume from Richard's words that black boys (symbols of the poor group) and white boys (symbols of the wealthy group) have been educated to hate each other. From a Fanonian perspective, that mutual hate is due to the fact "the white man is locked in his whiteness [and] the black man in his blackness [in] double narcissism" (Fanon 7). In his *Peau noire masques blancs*, Fanon criticizes the dichotomous relationship which prevails between Whites and Blacks and the fact it oppresses Blacks to such an extent they consider "there is only one destiny [and] it is a white one" (8). While analyzing Wright's *Native Son*, Fanon's perspective can be put in line with Marxism as one can contend the wealthier social group is locked in its wealth and the poorer social group in its poverty. That is why proletarians have no access to bourgeois areas and vice versa. Failure to abide by this socio-economic rule results in one class's violence on the other. Bigger as a poor black boy is aware of the inviolability of the class barriers that the capitalistic society has set. Mary is also aware of it but consciously exceeds her class borders and steps into Bigger's, making violability take place and violence imminent. As in a role-play game where one should knock before one is knocked down, Bigger decides to knock first, which, unfortunately, results in Mary's death.

In the role-play game, the poor sometimes meet pressure and failure as is the case with Bobo and Johnny-Boy in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Bigger in *Native Son* and Hoskins in *Black Boy* who all experience death. Nevertheless, these difficulties do not keep characters like

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<sup>169</sup> « Le Noir est pris dans un piège qui le tient dans une position figée telle que conçue et réalisée par la force dominante et gouvernante. Et le rôle du personnage principal, le Noir, consiste à élaborer un plan déjà tracé indépendamment de sa volonté et de sa conscience parce qu'il sait et sent que sa vie a été édifiée sur une accumulation de torts historiques, de préjugés sociaux et culturels de toutes sortes. C'est le comportement des Blancs qui est générateur des actes du Noir dans l'œuvre (*Native Son*), dont la criminalité physique. La peur, la haine et le sentiment de culpabilité sont l'essence de ce drame. »



Richard from pursuing their quest for possession and dignity, which assumes Wright advocates for resilience as the unique way to victory. According to Cyrulnik, “the word ‘resilience,’ [...] designates the ability of a material to resist shocks and regain a suitable shape. [...] This physical phenomenon served as a metaphor to illustrate the idea that a human being can resist a trauma, hold on and restart”<sup>170</sup> (Cyrulnik, 2012, 7-17, 8). But how can the oppressed human being resist a trauma and regain suitable shape in a world of chaos? For Cyrulnik, as “chaos corresponds to traumatic tearing and resilience responds to changes in the system [...], we cannot behave reasonably in the chaotic world, because it is impossible to go off in all directions” (Cyrulnik, 2008, 38). Nevertheless, through resilience, the oppressed people can still “give shape to the world to respond to it and behave in it [...] to give it meaning to adapt a strategy of existence”<sup>171</sup> (38, 40). Wright has traced the strategy to follow and Johnson unravels it quite well:

Moreover, no matter the chosen path and the failures encountered, Richard Wright’s hero is always capable of revaluing his human dignity. In no way can he refuse confrontation in his attempt to restore human values, because he wants to make the White man recognize and respect his will and choice, which is a sign of autonomy and balance quest<sup>172</sup>. (Johnson 544)

Johnson is right here when he suggests that the black man cannot refuse confrontation in his quest of dignity. In other words, proletarians cannot avoid confrontation if they want to achieve the disappearance of social classes. Because the bourgeoisie always stands on their way like barriers, the only way to move forward is to confront and break these barriers.

In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, the barrier is symbolically represented by Heartfield who keeps Mann from bringing his pregnant wife to hospital. It is not until he removes Heartfield from his way that he can carry his wife to the hospital, which backs the idea according to which Wright’s early works are an indictment of American capitalism. Such an idea goes in line with Mamoun Alzoubi’s remark that “Wright’s undeniable critiques indict capitalism, a system that focuses on the concrete. This is a system where exchange value predominates, and the flexibility

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<sup>170</sup> « Le mot ‘résilience,’ qui vient du latin re-salire, est régulièrement employé dans les sciences physiques ou il désigne l’aptitude d’un matériau à résister aux chocs et à reprendre une forme convenable. Comme très souvent en psychologie et particulièrement chez Freud, ce phénomène physique a servi de métaphore pour illustrer l’idée qu’un être humain peut résister à un trauma, tenir le coup et redémarrer. »

<sup>171</sup> « Le chaos correspond à la déchirure traumatique et la résilience répond aux remaniements du système... On ne peut pas se conduire raisonnablement dans le monde chaotique, car il est impossible de partir en tous sens. Il faut donner forme au monde pour lui répondre et s’y comporter, il faut lui donner sens pour adapter une stratégie d’existence. »

<sup>172</sup> « Au demeurant, quels que soient la voie empruntée et les échecs essuyés, le héros de Richard Wright est toujours capable de revalorisation de sa dignité humaine. En aucun cas il ne peut refuser la confrontation pour une tentative de rétablissement de valeurs humaines, parce qu’il veut amener le Blanc à reconnaître et à respecter sa volonté et son choix, signe de quête d’autonomie et d’équilibre. »

of a lucky few does not by any means collapse class binaries. Wright interrogates US capitalism” (Alzoubi 7). The Marxist ideology really permeates Wright’s early novels, particularly *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son*. Through *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Wright conveys his perception of American society and suggests Marxist solutions capable of putting an end to the Manichean view of the poor by the rich. Marxism is supposed to gather all the poor people without any regard to race as a socio-cultural whole to win the battle against oppression and racism. Since human history is all about productive power relations according to the Marxist ideology, literary production enabled Wright to free himself from the status of a mere fragmented individual and to repossess social wholeness.

### 3. The Quest for Socio-Cultural Wholeness

Most of Wright’s protagonists are victims of identity fragmentation which plunges them into lack of wholeness. This happens because the conditions of dispossession rob them of their intrinsic identity to the point that they have no fixed identity. However, they do not remain passive and motionless. Quite on the contrary, they fight by taking courageous actions to piece their scattered identity together in order to achieve intrinsic identity. The protagonist of *Black Boy*, Richard, fits into this logic as he is constantly fighting and vigorously denouncing his identity fragmentation which keeps him from discovering himself:

I had fought. And it was perhaps a mere accident that I had never killed. [...] I had not had the chance to learn who I was. The pressure of southern living kept me from being the kind of person that I might have been [...]. Never being fully able to be myself, I had slowly learned that the South could recognize but a part of a man, could accept but a fragment of his personality, and all the rest, the best and deepest things of heart and mind, were tossed away in blind ignorance and hate. (*BB*, 283-284)

There is a conflict between those who cause Richard’s fragmentation and Richard. While some characters seem to accept their condition, Richard is convinced that the only way to escape all forms of dispossession is to flee his conflict zone to find a more comfortable area where he can express all his subjectivity, rebuild his fragmented life and discover his true self. As Richard testifies, “I was leaving the South [...] to meet other situations that would perhaps elicit from me other responses. And if I could meet enough of a different life, then, perhaps, gradually and slowly I might learn who I was, what I might be (*BB*, 284).

Whatever consequences Richard’s quest for wholeness might drag along, he is psychologically prepared to face it as Jacob Howland points out: “Richard does not consume

himself; nor is he destroyed in his attempt to withstand the reactive forces he provokes. Instead, his soul is toughened and he learns to endure negative forces” (Howland 123). Such an attitude can be compared with Cyrulnik’s concept of resilience which “serves as a metaphor to illustrate the idea that a human being can resist a trauma, hold on and restart” (Cyrulnik, 2012, 7-17, 8). And when events such as emotional and cultural marginalization become hard to bear and threaten to overcome his resistance, Richard doesn’t hesitate to shift, move and adjust so as to keep his wholeness intact. The reader can clearly grasp this reality from his own words: “Existing emotionally on the sheer, thin margin of southern culture, [...] I had grown used to change, to movement, to making many adjustments” (*BB*, 282). Wherever Richard finds himself, he develops a defensive instinct which, according to Howland, is “a moral sense which makes him reject what is frivolous and moves restlessly through each areas of living that threatens his faculties and his sense of human wholeness” (Howland 125). This sense of moral instinct can be seen when Richard refuses to take his irresponsible father’s money, and is reluctant at stealing, “feeling that [he] had had to do with something unclean” (*BB*, 42).

Characters like Big Boy, Bigger and Richard are deprived of any territory where they can define and assert themselves with fully-fledged identity since the entire identity-based territorial space is occupied by the dominant group. Wright’s characters, however, challenge this situation by contesting the deprivation of identity in order to leave their status as abject marginalized individuals to become subjects with a socio-cultural identity that situates them at the center. Richard intends to leave the identity of the outside which is that of the margin and to step into the identity of the inside which is that of the center. Because all spaces and paths leading to identity are closed to characters like Richard, Demirtürk contends that “Wright opens up the spaces of discourse out of which he produces a text that represents the social site of the hidden transcript in transformation”<sup>173</sup> (Demirtürk 279). Whether in *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, the dispossessed characters hide their racial pride and speak and act meekly, which is congruent with public transcript. However, once they are alone among themselves, they express all their criticisms against power holders, which is congruent with hidden transcript. If Demirtürk’s contention turns out valid, it can thus be said Wright was a resilient writer in a Cyrulnikan sense, because he got enough courage to share his own social trauma with his readers through his fictional autobiography. As Cyrulnik wrote, “the story of trauma only has a resilient effect

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<sup>173</sup> The transcript is a concept coined by James C. Scott in his book titled *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* in 1990. This concept was re-used by Demirtürk E. Lâle to analyze *Black Boy*. There are two transcripts, namely the public transcript and the hidden transcript. The public transcript is the “open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate,” while the hidden transcript is the “discourse that takes place offstage, beyond direct observation by power holders” (Demirtürk 269).

when it is sublimated and shared. That is why art plays a major role in resilience”<sup>174</sup> (Cyrulnik, 2012, 16). *Black Boy* is really the symbol of Wright’s resilience as it “has spoken to the center, repositioning himself as a black man [...]. Wright not only speaks from the nation’s margin to the center but from within the site of racial otherness [...] in an attempt to authenticate it through the agency of his African American masculine subjectivity” (Demirtürk 279). Such a subjectivity can sometimes be hard to reach as uncertainties are everywhere.

The lives of Wright’s protagonists suggest that the search for identity can be a painful experience. However, feeling a sense of identity can only be achieved through painful experiences and personal struggles with the distant and immediate environment. Richard tells the reader about his personal experience in which “he had not had the chance to know who [he] was” (*BB*, 227). He goes further deploring that “the pressure of the southern living kept me from being the kind of person I might have been. I had been what my surroundings had demanded, what my family [...] had said I must be” (*BB*, 227). In this respect, Claudia Tate contends that Richard’s testimony exemplifies the fact that “he feels with alarming urgency that he has to know who he is and who he can be, and this compulsion, this hunger, ultimately forces him to leave the South in order that he might face the possibility of discovering his own identity” (Tate 118). Consistent with Tate’s comment is the fact that Richard is ready to challenge the traditional identity imposed on him not only by the dispossessing society but also by family members such as Aunt Granny, who “created a distance between him and the world in which he lived” (Hannush 52). To recover one’s alienated identity, one has to break out of the dispossessing family and discover one’s true environment, the only place where self-identity is achievable away from pressure, even though one has to go through various deprivations like hunger. In *Black Boy*, Richard corroborates this idea in his testimony:

I now saw a world leap to life before my eyes because I could explore it, and that meant not going home when school was out, but wandering, watching, asking, talking. Had I gone home to eat my plate of greens, Granny would not have allowed me out again, so the penalty I paid for roaming was to forfeit my food for twelve hours. I would eat mush at eight in the morning and greens at seven or later at night. To starve in order to learn about my environment was irrational, but so were my hunger. (*BB*, 111)

As one can sense from Richard’s testimony, starving was the *sine qua none* condition for discovering and exploring his identity. Because he knows he would be at loggerheads with Granny if he goes home, he prefers starving to enjoy his identity. Starving, therefore, triggers

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<sup>174</sup> « Le récit de la blessure n’a d’effet de résilience que lorsqu’il est sublimé et partagé. C’est pourquoi l’art joue un rôle majeur dans la résilience. »

his self-consciousness and convinces him that the only way to escape identity dispossession is through personal struggle. Food nourishes Richard's body while the knowledge of his true environment nourishes his mind and enables him to walk towards self-identity (Tate 118). Self-identity is self-creation in a context of socio-cultural dispossession and *Black Boy* came out as the representative of the identity-less and shows them that self-creation is possible through constant struggle (Hakutani 73), as it permeates Bigger's whole life in *Native Son*. Bigger's self-creation is contrary to the predominant social values, which makes him a violent non-conformist. The society in which Bigger lives perceives self-creation as social, economic and political tools bringing success. The problem behind this perception is that success as self-creation is waved in Bigger's eyes and yet out of his reach, which compels him to create his own definition of self-creation. Following his two murders, one can understand that self-creation for Bigger consists in posing tremendous acts such as rape or crime. That is why he feels being born again after killing Mary.

Richard in *Black Boy* uses clever and subtle strategies to shape his identity as opposed to Bigger in *Native Son* who is so impatient that he would certainly find Richard's methods too accommodating. That is why Bigger uses stronger methods like violence to regain his identity and to move from dispossession to repossession. His daring to challenge the white reporter who calls him Mike instead of Bigger foreshadows his future violent determination to achieve and preserve his identity. As white reporters gather in Mr. Dalton's home, following the unsolved murder of Mary, one of them turns to Bigger: "Say, Mike, you think this Erlone fellow did this?" "My name is Bigger," Bigger said, resentfully (*NS*, 208). Bigger corrects the reporter to protest and claim for his identity and selfhood, testifying his refusal to be a man with no identity whom anyone can refer to by any name (Bryant 263). This determination of Bigger to acquire an identity sometimes leads him to violence against his fellow men.

While Bigger's violence may lead some readers to view him as a rough beast as he coldly kills Bessie and Mary, Ellis argues that Bigger's violent methods reflect his exasperation at dispossession and his quest for self-consciousness and wholeness (Ellis 186). As the narrative corroborates, when Bigger is left lonely in his prison cell, he longs for "a response of recognition [...], union, identity [...], a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life" (*NS*, 335). As a result, notwithstanding Whites' fury unleashed against him following his murder of Mary, Bigger shoulders responsibility for the crime to get at least an identity. He becomes part of a national drama even though he is aware he will be apprehended and killed (Grenander 130), but the risk of being killed does not prevent Bigger from being fully satisfied after his murder, because he has succeeded in creating a world for himself (Tuitt

212), or one could say, an identity for himself. One might be tempted to say that Bigger is a racist since he kills a white woman for no good reason, but Wright cautions us against such a perception through Bessie whom Bigger also kills even though she is black. Actually, Bigger's murderous tendency is simply a reflection of his willingness to continue his walk towards identity while sweeping aside any obstacles which may stand in his way. As such, Scotland and Wilhite argue that *Native Son* transcends color issues to combat prejudice against Whites as well as Blacks by disrupting the reproduction of oppressive relations which ensnare the dispossessed (Scotland 3; Wilhite 105). So said, Wright is against the tradition of oppressive authority and yearns for an individual identity coming from his own perceptions and thoughts (Wilhite 113), all of which congruent with mainstream culture.

Every society has a cultural identity common to all its members. That is usually referred to as mainstream cultural identity. This is made up of a system of values such as beliefs, habits, hobbies, education, ways of thinking and acting. In a context of dispossession, the majority sometimes imposes its cultural identity to be mainstream while crushing other cultural identities considered as minor. The problem is, yet, not just the crushing of minorities but also their rejection from mainstream culture. It is in such a context that the dispossessed minorities are found in Wright's works. One of their strategies consists in creating what can be called subculture. According to Makombe, who paraphrases Sutherland, a sub-culture can be defined as,

A set of values and norms parallel to conventional culture. It upholds a way of life that is normally considered criminal or deviant, and social groups that subscribe to subculture are often stigmatized by those who subscribe to the dominant culture. The relationship between subcultures and dominant cultures resonates with the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, for the latter is often criminalized even when he/she exhibits the violence embedded in the culture of the colonizer. Evidently, the idea of a subculture recognizes difference and seeks to empower the minority cultures [...]. (Makombe 292)

It is clear from this definition that the culturally-dispossessed have no choice but to create their own culture within the major culture even though this is viewed as deviant and criminalized by members of the dominant culture. Even though subculture uses subtle means to counteract the dominant culture while avoiding oppositional violence, it can sometimes turn into violence against the group who dispossesses. However, because this subcultural violence is used to counter the dominant culture, its perpetrators do not feel any remorse nor guilt as is the case of Bigger in *Native Son*. After killing Mary, while commonsense would expect Bigger to regret accidentally killing an innocent girl, he feels some sense of power (*NS*, 104) as though to suggest that violence has become a subcultural value.

In the lives of Wright's characters, violence has become an integral part of subculture since it is even embedded in the upbringing of children. Richard endures all the rigors of a violent upbringing carried out not only by his grandmother Granny but also and especially by his own mother Ella. One can still remember one *Black Boy* scene where Richard is assaulted by a gang on his way home from a shopping his mother asked him to do. Richard comes home crying with no money but his mother sends him back with another sum of money to face violence in the streets. Even if Richard does not understand his mother's attitude from the start, he himself later recognizes that violence is part of the values that a dispossessed person should demonstrate in order to be accepted and respected in his community. For instance, when Richard is sent to school, his first task is to fight and display his harmful capacity. He fights hard and, "after [he] had exhibited [his] new weapon at school, a description of it spread among the boys, [he] challenged [his] enemy to another fight, but he would not respond. Fighting was not now necessary. [He] had been accepted" (*BB*, 103). Violence as a subcultural element is generally perpetrated among the dispossessed themselves and not towards their oppressors.

To maintain a balance of power between them and their oppressors and to demonstrate their non-conformism to the dominant culture, the dispossessed group rather uses stratagems allowing them to criticize and act against the dominant group without being detected. Theft is one of their ploys because it permits to avoid direct confrontation and to assault interests without being caught. In addition to theft, the exploitation of the stereotypical system to combat the same stereotypes is a useful strategy. It consists in wearing the mask of ignorance, in accordance with the myth that the dominant group has forged about them, to enter the social, cultural and economic space of this group and, to borrow Makombe's words, "make things happen from within" (Makombe 309). That is a subtle strategy that Makombe, inspired by two *Black Boy* scenes, further explains:

Making things happen from within is perhaps that strategy that Shorty uses to get money from white people. He manipulates the fallacy of the nigger with so tough an ass that he cannot feel any pain to get money for subsistence. Similarly, Richard uses the white man's stereotype to cheat the system and educate himself. (309)

Henry Louis Gates, quoted by Maaloum, calls this strategy "trickery", consisting in acting out according to white perception in order to enter and go out of white world while serving their own interests<sup>175</sup> (Maaloum 244-246). It is exactly the kind of trickery that Bigger plays after

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<sup>175</sup> This strategy can be linked to the "trickster figure" developed by many minority groups to access the major group's spaces. Black Americans particularly developed this strategy during Jim Crow laws to break into white

his murder of Mary to manipulate her parents and the police according to his own interests. Mary's parents, the Daltons, do not perceive Bigger's subjectivity. On the contrary, all they can see in Bigger is a little boy without any identity, shy, ignorant and incapable of any subtle act. Bigger exploits this stereotype and plots to extort money from the parents of his victim while diverting their attention to Jan Erlone, the communist. So, all the police and journalists set their eyes on Jan while Bigger roams with his comrades down the street, telling their own stories.

Stories are an integral part of the subcultural strategies used by the dispossessed to challenge the dominant culture. Since their stories are not recognized and told in the midst of mainstream culture, the dispossessed often come together and tell their own stories in the hope of arousing resistance against historical dispossession. These stories generally speak of feats accomplished by the dispossessed (Makombe 309). Wright uses the same strategy in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Silas, Mann, and Sue all bravely confront the dominant group in a deadly battle for subjectivity (*UTC*, 71; 69), which corroborates Abdul Jan Mohamed's suggestion that resistance occurs only when the oppressed person takes control over his subjectivity (In Mechling 292). In *Native Son*, Bigger leaves his fear behind and faces oppression by killing a white girl, Mary Dalton. In *Black Boy*, we read about one Mr. Green who threatens a white woman, saying "if she slaps [him], [he] will kill her and go to hell and pay for it" (*BB*, 76). Moreover, Richard hears about a woman whose husband was killed and who took a gun to avenge him and Richard resolves to imitate the woman (*BB*, 83-84).

Telling their own stories is a way for those who are oppressed to resist historical dispossession. They do their best to find alternative places to interact and share their common experience through the maintenance of extended family ties, which permits to perpetuate cultural unity and resist assimilationist policies as is the case of the black community in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Gathering and sharing common experiences can also be seen in *Black Boy*. In one street scene where Richard and his comrades meet, the talk reveals all the values that they acquire from there:

'Yeah, man. I done really feed my face.' Casually.

'I had cabbage and potatoes.' Confidently.

'I had buttermilk and black-eyed peas.' Meekly informational [...].

'Yeah, if they hava race riot round here, I'm gonna kill all the white folks with my poison.' Bitter pride. Gleeful laughter. Then silence, each waiting for the other to contribute something.

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spaces without being noticed, and to repossess their humanity. For more details on the trickster figure developed by Black Americans, see the last section in the closing chapter of this part.



‘Them white folks sure scared of us, tough.’  
Sober statement of an old problem.

‘Yeah, they send you to war, make you lick them Germans, teach you how to fight and when you come back they scared of you, want to kill.’ Half boastful and half complaining. (*BB* 90)

As can be observed, these meetings in the street are real moments of socialization. They are typical of Black American life in the South that urban Blacks seek to recreate when they settled in Northern big cities. Moreover, the last but one sentence of the excerpt reveals Wright’s denouncement of black disillusionment when they returned from the two World Wars. In fact, as American participation in these wars gathered white and black soldiers on the same battlegrounds, Blacks expected that their sacrifice would be recognized and cross-racial understanding would come true. However, expectations were not met and racial animosity lingered on as Nathan Vergel evidences:

The training of African American soldiers not only brought them into greater contact with whites in the military, but also in contact with compassionate white civilians. Yet, [...] these desegregating moments were at times highly confrontational and appeared to further racial animosities rather than begin to heal them. (Gergel 91)

Indeed, Blacks’ participation in World War I and II did not put an end to racial domination, alienation and dispossession. Wright projects this sad reality in *Black Boy* where street meetings allow Blacks to strengthen their socialization and to express their disapproval of the established system of domination and chart a way out of alienation. Even though they cannot express their anger before their dispossessors, such encounters in the street allow them to let off steam without fear of reprisal. “The first white sonofabitch that bothers me is gonna get a hole knocked in his head!” (*BB*, 90), one boy spits out, which shows that race has become one of the major topics among them. Because mainstream American culture led Whites to view themselves as superior to Blacks, knocking a hole in a white person’s head, as the boy says in *Black Boy*, would be defiantly unconventional.

## CHAPTER VIII: THE DEFIANCE OF CONVENTIONS

A convention is a set of social, moral, economic and political traditions that all members of a society or organization are expected to respect for harmonious community life. From this point of view, “Conventions are thus collectively established cultural forms that make it possible to coordinate and evaluate”<sup>176</sup> (Diaz-Bone, Thévenot 10). As a result, convention is supposed to be unanimous insofar as it is the emanation of general will to better govern relationships between individuals (Webber 17). In all cases, its objective is to promote social relations for the well-being of all and in case of misunderstandings in organized societies, people usually fall back on convention to settle them. As Rainer Diaz-Bone and Laurent Thévenot point out, “Conventions are collective frameworks on which actors rely in their conflicts and their evaluations in public”<sup>177</sup> (Diaz-Bone, Thévenot 15). In other words, conventions are the point of reference which supervise and regulate human collective life. However, Diaz-Bone and Thévenot caution by pointing out that, sometimes, individuals may question conventions to build personal alternatives in their relationship with their social environment. As they assert,

There are ways of engaging with the surrounding world (human or not) that are less collective and more personal, that provide regimes of 'convenience' that do not allow coordination of such a wide scope, but governing the accomplishment of an individual project or the familiar appropriation in the dynamic relationship between the human being and his environment<sup>178</sup>. (15)

The personal ways of engaging with the environment out of social conventions often occur “when conventions become orders of justification or ‘power’ or when actors are criticized”<sup>179</sup> (11). In this case, one would say from a Deleuzian perspective that conventions are often a kind of territorialization and the action of individuals defying these conventions can be perceived as de-territorialization. Wright’s protagonists in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* follow this logic of de-territorializing existing conventions.

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<sup>176</sup> « Les conventions sont ainsi des formes culturelles établies collectivement permettant de coordonner et d’évaluer. »

<sup>177</sup> « Les conventions sont des cadres collectifs sur lesquels les acteurs prennent appui dans leurs conflits et leurs évaluations en public. »

<sup>178</sup> « Il existe des façons de s’engager dans le monde environnant (humain ou non) qui sont moins collectives et plus personnelles, qui assurent des régimes de convenance ne permettant pas une coordination d’une aussi large portée, mais gouvernant l’accomplissement d’un projet individuel ou l’appropriation familière dans la relation dynamique entre l’être humain et son environnement. »

<sup>179</sup> « Les conventions deviennent des ordres de justification ou « grandeurs » ou lorsque les acteurs sont critiqués. »

In Wright's fictional universe, conventions are in all forms of organization or social groupings ranging from the family institution to the public or state institution. In families, they come in the form of codes of conduct instilled in members from an early age. Since some family actors like Big Boy, Bigger and Richard perceive these codes as alienating, they adopt attitudes contrary to these conventions in order to repossess their freedom to be and to act. It is, therefore, appropriate in the first section, to examine the way rebellious family members defy family conventions in order to possess their own. Conventions are not present in the family only. They also exist in the public sphere in the form of laws that citizens must respect. However, because these conventions, branded by Jim Crow, are used to justify and legitimize the power and domination of the dominant group, the very characters who defy family codes of conduct do not balk at bringing their unconventional attitudes into the public sphere. Thus, how do these characters manage to transpose their defiance of established conventions from the family to the public sphere is the issue the second section will address. Whether in the family or in the public sphere, defiance of conventions carries significant negative sanctions such as corporal punishment and even death (Durkheim in Mauss 1971). From this point of view, it is ultimately necessary to shed light on the risks run by non-conformists in their impulse to question conventions and to repossess their own ways of being and acting.

## **1. The Rejection of Family Code of Conduct**

One remarkable feature of the rejection of family code of conduct stems from the break of parental responsibility. Family is a microcosm of social life where parental responsibility plays a key role in the balance of family and the development of children <sup>180</sup> (Ceka, Murati 61). Conforming to and shouldering this responsibility remain vital for the very existence of the family. In Wright's fictional families, parental responsibility is not entirely shouldered by parents, which appears to be a form of non-conformism to the fundamental principles which ensure the smooth running of family life. It is the responsibility of every parent to supervise

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<sup>180</sup> Ceka and Murati explain that parents' responsibility is at the core of the present and future of children. For them, parents set the tone, or one can say the code of conduct, for a harmonious family which children reproduce in society. The future of children is necessarily in the hands of their parents because, before they go to school to receive secondary education, children's behaviors are conditioned by what their parents have taught them at home as basic values or what can be called primary socialization. That a child is hardworking or lazy, generous or selfish, respectful or disrespectful at school or in society depends on what parents transmit him at home (Ceka, Murati 63-64). In other words, as Ceka and Murati go further, the child cannot succeed in school and society if parents do not co-construct his/her personality by learning to know the rules about his/her physical and psychological development (64). For more details on this, see also Durisic and Bunijevac's "Parental Involvement as an Important Factor for Successful Education" (2017).

children in a way to protect them and ensure their physical and psychological safety. Whether in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, parental responsibility is not fully shouldered.

It is a known fact that Mr. Wright, Richard's father in *Black Boy*, does not represent any responsibility figure for his son. On the contrary, instead of taking care of his son in a context of dispossession to ensure his physical and psychological development, Mr. Wright fails to shoulder his responsibility as a father and indulges in fiddling with other young girls in extra-marital love affairs. This attitude is contrary to family code of conduct and we are led to understand it through Richard's account:

My father and a strange woman were sitting before a bright fire that blazed in a grate. My mother and I were standing about six feet away, as though we were afraid to approach them any closer. [...] 'Come here, boy' the strange woman called to me. I looked at her and did not move. [...] 'You ought to be ashamed,' my mother said to the strange woman. 'You're starving my children.' [...] 'You ought to be dead,' I said to the strange woman. The woman laughed and threw her arms about my father's neck. I grew ashamed and wanted to leave. (*BB*, 40-41)

This scene takes place when Richard is brought to his father to ask for money and buy food. They find him fiddling with a girl-friend whom Richard describes as a strange woman. The latter is actually Mr. Wright's lover for whom he violates his duty as a father, thus denying his parental responsibility. What about Bigger's father in *Native Son* who is never mentioned in the narrative? One could suggest he is certainly absent from his son's education as he is from the novel. And when Bigger's father is not around to play his role as a father, his mother does not actually fill this gap as she spends her time coming to terms with dispossession by scapegoating Bigger instead of encouraging and putting him in confidence for his psychological and emotional stability. Some of the commonly known remarks that Bigger's mother makes him are the kind to frustrate and discourage him and this is evidenced by some of her bitter and disrespectful statements such as "Bigger, I sometimes wonder why I birthed you. [...] He's just crazy, just plain dumb crazy. [...] Some of these days you going to set down and cry" (*NS*, 19, 20). Indeed, such a belligerent attitude towards Bigger is certainly opposite to a mother's code of conduct in the family which should be an emotional springboard for the growing child who needs maternal tenderness and love to build himself smoothly into adulthood. What can children do to move from dispossession to possession when parents build their future on decisions and actions which are not in conformity with fundamental family code of conduct? One could be tempted to contend that these children cannot but fall into street life without any family educational framework as we can see Bigger and Gus in *Native Son*, Richard and Harrison in

*Black Boy* indulge in street life as a way to feel some sense of possession. Their looking for some sense of possession in the street is really the result of parental irresponsibility which deprives them of any sense of family belonging.

One of the features of parental irresponsibility lies in over-exaggerating family pressures on children such as bullying, beating, rigid discipline, shaming, holding back or hiding affection, lack of pride, spending time comparing the children to other people's children<sup>181</sup> (Lindberg, 2020). This is, yet, the daily experience of a number of children in Wright's novels under study. In *Native Son*, Mr. Dalton exerts bourgeois pressure on his daughter Mary by forbidding her any contact with people of communist obedience like Jan Erlone. As for Bigger, none of his actions meets his mother's agreement while Richard in *Black Boy* is completely isolated from family love because of his self-awakening and conscious positioning as a non-conformist child. Despite making many efforts to become financially independent at an early age, Richard's Grandmother Granny, who ensures his custody after his mother's stroke and subsequent paralysis, finds no pride in him simply because he refuses to conform to her fundamentalist Adventist principles. Granny only views Richard as a little devil and displays towards him parental irresponsibility which is generally characterized by emotional distancing, lack of interaction, disaffection, all of which are conflicting with a normal and responsible family code of conduct. Much as Granny, Bigger's mother does not fully shoulder parental responsibility, which is a non-conformist violation of family code of conduct. A mother is supposed to protect her children, but in constantly bullying and insulting him, Mrs. Thomas contributes to Bigger's sense of nothingness, hence his resistance to parental authority.

Parental authority is basically important in children's education because it traces the path for them to follow in a process of relational and active participation and communication between parents and children<sup>182</sup> (Kuhar, Reiter, 2013). Without any parental authority, children

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<sup>181</sup> Lindberg (2020) contends that for a good development of children, parents must stop all these misbehaviors and focus on decisive parenting models such as regulating emotions, connecting with the children, prioritizing family time each night, like eating dinner together, coaching instead of controlling, etc. This parenting style is all that is missing in Richard's and Bigger's primary socializations respectively in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, which leads them both into non-conformism to what they surely view as bad parenting style. For more information on parental irresponsibility, see Niaraki and Rahimi's "Impact of Authoritative, Permissive and Authoritarian Behavior of Parents on Self-concept, Psychological Health and Life Quality" (2013).

<sup>182</sup> Kuhar and Reiter (2013) insist on the fact that parental authority should not be confused with parental authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is seen as a one-sided approach which gives parents full power to decide over what is to be done or avoided in the family. Conversely, parental authority is exerted through communication, co-construction and interaction between parents and children in a way that this authority is legitimized and accepted by all the family members. The exercise of parental authority recognizes children's reluctance as a process of participating in the construction of their personalities. This precision is instrumental here because both in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, parental authoritarianism is used in lieu of parental authority to regulate children's behavior, which ends up delving them into rebellion.

have no reference and will be at the mercy of street education (Galambos, Baker, Almeida, 2003). Indeed, children receive some forms of education from the street due to their daily interactions with the outside world, but parents remain the dominant authority referents who are capable of redressing the defects of street education which influences their children. Nevertheless, when parental authority turns into parental authoritarianism as is the case with Wright's characters, it is viewed by children as a form of dispossession of their basic needs and rights which they make use of non-conformism to repossess. One of the major remarks which can be made about Wright's works in general and *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* in particular is the fact that the various forms of dispossession make those who are under it entirely submitted to every condition at home to such an extent that they intend to transmit dispossessing ethics to their children as unquestionable values. *Uncle Tom's children* and *Black Boy* illustrate at will how women try and impose on children their way of handling dispossession. My previous analyses already highlighted the fact that women in general are alienated to the dire conditions which social reality imposes on them, even though some female characters such as Mary in *Native Son* and Sue in *Uncle Tom's Children* adopt opposite behaviors to possess their own ethics. Sue particularly challenges the advocates of dispossession by fighting to save her son Johnny-Boy from the yoke of white dispossessors as Horvath articulates in his analysis:

At the key moment of the text, Aunt Sue makes a conscious and willful decision on what the ethics of submission entails by the spiritual 'Bright and Morning Star.' [...] Knowing that she will find a beaten, tortured, and possibly dead Johnny-Boy, upon reaching the mob, Aunt Sue commits to making the ultimate sacrifice [by confronting the mob with a pistol]. (Horvath 19-20).

Notwithstanding Sue's attitude, female gender is generally under the yoke of sexist and racial alienation which they want to transmit to their children so as to protect them from the consequences of any rebellion. Such an attitude is without counting the determination of their children who intend to break away from these old parental attitudes by refusing to conform to dispossession.

While it has become a custom for some Blacks to educate their children in a way to conform to the conditions of dispossession as Ella and Granny try to apply it on Richard in *Black Boy*, he literally rebels and calls into question the old approach consisting in making use of parental authority to force him into perpetuating dispossession in the family in particular and society in general. While there prevails what can be called the ethics of Jim Crow laws as Shelby suggests, consisting in internalizing white supremacy on Blacks (Shelby 518), Richard

challenges his mother's authority and rises up against this racial status quo. As Gibson analyzes, Ella just conforms to the world the way it is and wants to oblige Richard to adopt the same way of life, but Richard cannot be happy with such a conception of life. So, even though Ella refuses to answer his questions or provide fallacious answers, Richard finally uses his reason to understand things and recovers a lot of knowledge in defiance of all his mother's attempts to prevent him from the truth about race relations (Gibson 493). Furthering his analysis on a specific *Black Boy* scene where Ella, during a trip, refuses to answer his son's questions on a colored-only boat, Gibson explains why Richard cannot but challenge his mother's authority:

Richard asks his mother perfect reasonable questions about the trip, but her answers are predetermined by fixed sense that the world is as it is without cause or reason. Hence her answers do not make sense [...]. What is true about the trip is not what the authoritative voice of Richard's mother tells him, but what he discovers through his own perception. The text following likewise reveals the unreliability of parents and therefore parental authority and the necessity to challenge it, resist, and finally reject parental authority, by rejecting, for perfectly good reason, the parents. (193)

In fact, in the scene Gibson analyzes, Richard asks his mother why the boat is called *Kate Adams* and his mother just shortly answers it is because "that's the boat's name (*BB*, 16). As Gibson remarks, "such knowledge one cannot depend upon" (93), and indeed, Richard refuses to depend upon it and challenges his mother's ordering him to stand still and silent to satisfy his curiosity. "[His] solace came when [he] wandered about the boat and gazed at Negroes throwing dice, drinking whisky, playing cards, lolling on boxes, eating, talking, and singing" (*BB*, 16), which unravels Wright's suggestion that he is tripping in a colored-only boat, a racial truth Ella hides from him but that he breaks into thanks to his non-conformism to maternal authority.

In addition to his mother, Granny is the most authoritative of Richard's grand family. Besides wanting to compel him to go to church, she intends to submit him to her stringent authority. However, Richard, who already challenged his mother's authority and asked her awareness-raising questions on the issue of dispossession, stands up to his grandmother's authoritarianism. For instance, according to Granny's family code of conduct, a child has no right to intervene in adults' discussions in the house in accordance with the general values of the black community as Tate explains in details:

Keeping silent had a special significance within the Black Community; it indicated acceptance, submission to the conditions of life, especially those caused by racial practices. Throughout *Black Boy*, Richard is repeatedly told to be silent, but he finds that it is against his fundamental nature to withhold his expressed opinions. (Tate 118)

As Tate explains, Richard is supposed to keep quiet, not to speak unless he is given the floor and just to obey commands without asking the slightest question. Such a requirement is not of Richard's liking because it dispossesses him of the right to participate in addressing family issues. As Tate interestingly remarks, "in his daily dealings with people, he reveals, often without thinking, the presence of his consciousness and as a result disturbs every facet of the Southern social framework. He emphatically defies those who would silence him" (118). For sure, Tate's remark is given credit by one *Black Boy* scene where Richard breaks the silence rule, thus challenging his parents' authority:

On one such lazy, hot summer night Granny, my mother, and Aunt Addie were sitting on the front porch, arguing some obscure point of religious doctrine. I sat huddled on the steps, my cheeks resting sullenly in my palms, half listening to what the grown-ups were saying and half lost in a daydream. Suddenly the dispute evoked an idea in me and, forgetting that I had no right to speak without permission, I piped up and had my say. [...] Granny said, 'Shut up, you!' and leaned forward promptly to chastise me with one of her casual, back-hand slaps on my mouth. (BB, 147)

Richard summons enough courage to break silence because, in the past, he already challenged Granny's authority as he protested against her ordering Ella, his home teacher, to stop reading for him *The Bluebeard and His Seven Wives* story:

'You stop that, you evil gal!' she shouted. I don't want none of that Devil stuff in my house!' Granny spat at Ella. 'But, Granny, she didn't finish,' [Richard] protested, 'knowing that [he] should have kept quiet.' 'You shut your mouth,' [Granny] hissed. 'You don't know what you're talking about!' 'But I want to hear what happened!' [Richard] wailed, dodging another blow that [he] thought was coming (BB, 47-48).

This scene highlights all the tenacity of Richard who subjects Granny's authority to the test of non-conformism in spite of the blows and slaps he undergoes for it, which allows understanding where he has got enough nerve to break into elders' talk in the family. Analyzing the entire conflicting relationship between Richard and Granny in the family, Makombe understates that Granny and Richard's conflict is a struggle between authority and insubordination or non-conformism. "Grandmother," Makombe wrote, "represents the dominant discourse that is responsible for setting the rules and constructing others. Richard's petty acts of resistance are statements of insubordination in the eyes of Grandmother's ruling Adventist ideology" (Makombe 296).

The same conflict prevails between Bigger and his mother in *Native Son*. He also challenges his mother's authority as he breaks silence principle and engages in cross-talk with her to possess his freedom:



'Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in my life!'  
 'You done told me that a thousand times [...]'  
 'Well I'm telling you again! And mark my words' [...] 'Some of these days you going to wish you had made something out of yourself, instead of just a tramp. But it'll be too late then!'  
 'Stop prophesying about me!'  
 'I prophesy as much as I please! And if you don't like it you can go out.'  
 'Aw! For Chrissake!' he said, his voice filled with nervous irritation.  
 'What you run in here and run out for, a little while ago?'  
 'Nothing.'  
 'Don't you go and get into trouble, now, boy.'  
 'Aw! Ma! Leave me alone!' (NS 19-20; 45-46)

As can be seen, Bigger ends up shouting at his mother to leave him alone. It can be guessed that Bigger is fed up with his mother's authoritarianism on his life and wants to become free as an individual. Apparently, one could think non-conformism to parental authority in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* basically manifests itself against female parents. Yet Wright shows that even male parents do not escape from their children's rebellion. Big Boy's father in *Uncle Tom's Children* is one of the cases in point. By sending his child to a black school, he hopes to keep him under control and away from white hostile areas. Such an attitude is without counting the determination of his child who intends to break away from these old parental attitudes by refusing to conform to dispossession. Big Boy's disobedience to parental authority comes to its peak when he plays truant and dangerously ventures into white-only facilities such as Jim's swimming pool. It is not until Big Boy and his comrades get into trouble with Jim that the reader discovers this trouble would not have arisen, had they obeyed their parents. As the narrative plays out, through Big Boy's conversation with his parents, the reader is led to know that he challenged their authority:

The old man walked slowly over to Big Boy. [...]  
 'How come yuh didn't go t school this mawnin?'  
 'We went to the woods'  
 'Didn't yo pa send yuh t school?'  
 'Yessuh.'  
 'How come yuh didn't go?'  
 'We went t the woods.'  
 'Don yuh know thas wrong?'  
 'Yessuh.'  
 'How come yuh go?'  
 Big Boy looked at his fingers, knotted them, and squirmed in his seat. (UTC, 35)

In some cases, we come across an irresponsible male parent who intends to dictate his principles to the whole family. While women usually just obey, this is clearly not the case with children. The case of oppressive and irresponsible male parents who want to impose themselves at all costs to the whole family is blatant in *Black Boy* with Richard's father. Mr. Wright has

fallen into the habit of spending more time outside at night and upon returning home, he wants to dispossess Richard of the right to play, arguing that he makes noise which disturbs his long sleeping time in the daytime. He requires entire silence in the house when he is sleeping. This silence, according to Tate, is the metaphor of submission which Richard challenges to recover his freedom<sup>183</sup> (Tate 118). Taking advantage of the cat scene where Mr. Wright orders him to kill the mewling cat, Richard literally obeys and kills the cat. Actually, such an apparent obedience sounds as disobedience since he is well aware that his father does not really mean what he said. By literally obeying his father, Richard contests his authority without being punished. Makombe goes further to consider that, “when Richard killed the cat, the intended victim is his father [...]. Metaphorically, killing the cat is an act of killing the father” (Makombe 301). Makombe is totally right with regard to Richard’s own words: “If someone had suggested that my father be killed, I would perhaps have become interested; if someone had suggested that his name never be mentioned, I would no doubt have agreed” (*BB*, 36). Makombe’s comment can also be applied to Bigger’s situation in *Native Son*.

In a scene where a rat disturbs the tranquility of the family, Bigger kills it furiously before using its dead body to frighten his sister Vera into faintness. Bigger’s crushing of the rat’s head foreshadows his crushing of parental authority (*NS*, 17), or one may suggest like Makombe that crushing the rat’s head is crushing his mother’s authority. While Richard uses subtle ways to avoid conforming to his father’s authority, other characters such as Bigger and Mary in *Native Son* go through more direct ways. In *Native Son*, the defiance of parental authority is so much pronounced. It is no surprise in this novel that a child will stand up to his father’s authority in his presence or absence. To a lesser extent, Bigger, Gus and Jack isolate themselves from their parents to escape from their authority. To do so, they spend more time together in the street than at home. In the midst of social and family dispossession, Bigger, Gus and Jack create a world for themselves, “consist[ing] of raiding newsstands, fruit stands, and apartments, going to movies, hanging out at the local poolroom, or simply loafing around” (Ellis 185). Richard also isolates himself from the family and is “now definitely decided upon leaving home. [...] [He is] poised for flight, but [he] is waiting for some event, some word, some act, some circumstance to furnish the impetus” (*BB*, 192). Actually, Richard’s determination to leave is intended to challenge his grandmother’s authority who forbids him to work on Saturdays. His argument with Granny in his departure scene tells much more about this fact:

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<sup>183</sup> Tate (1976) makes it clear that Richard’s challenging the silence rule has become a daily use and as the saying goes, “Use is a second nature.” Speaking without being given the floor has become so close to natural behavior to such an extent that he can no longer hold his tongue.

'I'm going to get a job anyway.'  
 'Then you can't live here,' she said.  
 'Then I'll leave,' I said, trembling violently.  
 'You won't leave,' she repeated.  
 'You think I'm joking, don't you?' I asked, determined to make her know how I felt.  
 'I'll leave this minute!'  
 I ran to my room, got a battered suitcase, and began packing my ragged clothes. She came to the door.  
 'You little fool! Put that suitcase down!'  
 'I'm going where I can work!' (BB, 159)

Richard defies Aunt Granny and promises to leave the house and go where he will repossess the right to work. In *Native Son*, Mary neither isolates herself nor leave the family but as a white girl, supposed to be enlightened, she defies her father's authority before a black boy called Bigger Thomas who has come for his job interview. In fact, Mary has got enough nerve to challenge his father's authority before a "negro boy" by asking Bigger whether he is a communist and calls his father a capitalist. The following scene has it more:

The girl came close to him and sat just opposite his [Bigger's] chair.  
 'Bigger, do you belong to a union?' she asked?  
 'Now, Mary!' said Mr. Dalton, frowning.  
 'Well father he should,' the girl said turning to him, then back to Bigger. 'Do you?'  
 'Mary!' said Mr. Dalton.  
 'I'm just asking him a question, Father!' [...]  
 'No' m, he mumbled, his head down and his eyes glowering.  
 'And why not?' The girl asked. [...]  
 'Now, Mary, you can see that the boy is new,' said Mr. Dalton. [...]  
 'Alright, Mr. Capitalist,' she turned again to Bigger. 'Isn't he a capitalist, Bigger?' (NS, 54)

This scene must be embarrassing for a great and rich man like Mr. Dalton. As a matter of fact, Mr. Dalton belongs to the upper class and holds the means of production; more clearly put, he belongs to the Bourgeoisie and tries to educate his daughter according to the values of his social class. Against all odds, Mary does not conform to the rich people's manners of her father. It can be remembered in the above-mentioned scene that, at a given moment of their conversation, Mr. Dalton has his head down as though to suggest that his daughter has taken the upper hand on his authority just as Richard has won the battle against his father's authority in *Black Boy*. Mary's manners towards her father and Bigger reveal Wright's intention to show that race and class are actually social constructions and that where there is a will, people can break racial barriers just as Mary does. Generally speaking, the protagonists in *Uncle Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy* are reluctant to conforming to their parents' dispossessing authority, including their religious stances.

Religion plays a key role in black families as it enables them to stand dispossession in a strong faith that God will help them out of their situation. And even though the situation does not get better on earth, dispossessed black folks believe in the compensation of suffering by eternal happiness in Heaven. This reality is projected in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* through the respective characterizations of Reverend Taylor, Mrs. Thomas and Reverend Hammond, and Aunt Granny. The latter, in her fundamentalist Adventist view of life in general and suffering in particular, ends up rebelling sensitive and pragmatic thinkers like Richard. Generally speaking, relationship between pragmatic thinkers and religious ones in the same family are punctuated with the categorical refusal of the former to conform to the spirituality of the latter. One does not necessarily need to be a gifted reader to notice this reality in Wright's various works of art, but Muhammad's comment makes simpler the understanding of Wright's view about religion and spirituality:

Wright made a hypothetical statement that summed up his attitude towards God and the suffering in the world. In other words, he expressed his ideology about religion, that if after suffering from dread, fear, hunger, terror and loneliness, another fear of an invisible power is added to his miserable life, then that the invisible power, if it actually exists, and could not do anything to alleviate those visible calamities he had experienced firsthand, then it does not deserve either his acknowledgement of its existence or further additional subjugation of his already over-troubled soul in the hope of reaping anything in the hereafter. (Muhammad 604)

Muhammad's comment suggests that Wright was pragmatically shaped by the hard circumstances of real life to such an extent that he could imagine the world beyond what he could see and touch, and not even his mother Ella, his grandmother Granny, could change his pragmatic stance.

In *Black Boy*, though Aunt Granny, Aunt Addie and Ella are fervent Adventist churchgoers exerting pressure on Richard to rally him to their spirituality, he refuses to conform. Even though Richard and his brother Léon are sometimes obliged to go to church, they actually don't go there to meet God. On the contrary, as Richard's testimony reveals, their objective is pretty far from that of the believers:

[...] Church was not where we learned of God or His ways, but where we met our school friends and continued our long, rambling talks. Some of the Bible stories were interesting in themselves, but we always twisted them, secularized them to our street life, rejecting all meanings that did not fit into our environment. And we did the same to the beautiful hymns. When the preacher intoned: *Amazing grace, how sweet it sounds*, we would sink at one another and hum under our breath: *A bulldog ran my grandma down*. (BB, 92-93)

Richard and his comrades secularize Bible stories according to their own realities. Even though Richard finally accepts under pressure to be baptized for his mother's sake (*BB*, 170-171), once at home, his non-conformism to family spirituality remains intact and this is made clear when he admits that during domestic prayers, he listens indifferently because he does not believe in cosmic realities. His personality has already been shaped by life experiences (*BB*, 123-124). When Granny obliges him to pray, Richard fakes praying seriously. Worse, he challenges his grandmother's spiritual authority at church by belying her to the point that she feels ashamed and weeps publicly, an event Richard tells with apparent disappointment or, perhaps, regret:

I leaned to her [Granny] and whispered: 'You see, Granny, if I ever saw an angel like Jacob did, then I'd believe.' [...] The service ended and Granny rushed to the front of the church and began talking excitedly to the elder; I saw the elder looking at me in surprise. 'Oh, goddam, she's telling him!' I thought with anger. But I had not guessed one-thousandth of it. The elder hurried toward me. [...] 'Your grandmother told me,' he said in awed tones. [...] 'She says you have seen an angel.' The words literally poured out of his mouth. I was so overwhelmed that I gritted my teeth. Finally, I could speak and I grabbed his arm. 'No...N-nooo, sir!' I stammered. 'I didn't say that. She misunderstood me.' [...] The elder blinked his eyes in bewilderment. 'What did you tell her?' he asked. 'I told her that if I ever saw an angel, then I would believe,' I said, feeling foolish, ashamed, hating and pitying my believing Granny. The elder's face became bleak and stricken. He was stunned with disappointment [...]. Granny drew away from me abruptly and went to a far corner of the church and stared at me with a cold, set face. [...] On our way home, she would not utter a single word. (*BB*, 129-131)

Richard seems to be really sorry for belying Granny publicly but, indeed, it is clear that he cannot stand protecting her authority to the detriment of the truth. One can see that Richard and Granny's conflict is public as well as private. Despite regretting making Granny feel ashamed at church, Richard does not take any action at home to catch up. On the contrary, he goes on denying her spirituality by refusing to pray, asserting that he simply cannot pray (*BB*, 132).

Richard resists any attempts made by Granny to save his soul through religion (Caron 47), just as he already does it in the introduction of *Uncle Tom's Children* where he denies the songs claiming that life is a paradise in the South (51). Come what may, Richard remains in contradiction with Granny's oppressive religiosity (Maaloum 225-227). As a general rule, Richard views Granny's religion as a tool of domination but not of freedom fight. Such a view of religion shows through in the attitude of Reverend Taylor's son in *Uncle Tom's Children* where he contests his father's authority and organizes a fight against injustice and discrimination. Religion prevents action and even Jimmy, Reverend Taylor's son, apparently translates this assertion into his behavior following his father's molesting by the white mob. While his father still suffers from his molesting, he keeps on relying on his faith and attempts to convince his son that no man alone but God, of whom he is a servant, can put an end to his

suffering. Jimmy has already opened a realistic eye to the point of challenging his father's spiritual authority and joins communists to find pragmatic ways and means to stop oppression (*UTC*, 171-173). By so doing, Jimmy, henceforth, shares the same pragmatic values with Richard in *Black Boy* and they both stand up to their parents' conformist manners. In their quest for unlimited freedom, they even go beyond their respective family spheres and carry their mavericks to the public place by breaking away from political and ethical conventions.

## **2. Breaking away from Communist and Ethical Conventions**

Conventions are principles on which all members of any society agree for a harmonization of public life. Normally, conformity to conventions reduces social conflicts (Airiau, Sen, Villatoro, 2013). Sociologist Lewis asserts that "everyone conforms, everyone expects others to conform, and everyone has good reason to conform, because conforming is in each person's interest when everyone plans to conform" (Lewis 22). According to Airiau, Sen and Villatoro (2013), conventions "play a pivotal role in all kinds of business, political, social and personal choices and interactions." Airiau, Sen and Villatoro further explain the importance of norms by the fact that they facilitate human interactions. If there are no norms, it will be difficult for humans to communicate, because each individual has his own principles. By putting their personal principles together as one, this prevents conflicts of values and forms what Boella *et al.* define as "normative multi-agent system" which is "organized by means of mechanisms to represent, communicate, distribute, detect, create, modify and enforce norms and mechanisms to deliberate about norms and detect norms violation and fulfilment" (Boella *et al.* in Airiau, Sen, Villatoro, 2013). Any behavior contrary to the rules and principles of society can be considered as unconventional. However, when designed conventions fail to take into account all the components of society, problems will surely arise as the latter will be tempted to be reluctant to conform, which will lead them to display unconventional behaviors in the public place.

In Wright's novels, public conventions exist but the problem lies in the fact that they are designed in a way to serve only the interests of the dominant group which is reluctant to "critical awareness of social conventions that maintain systems of [...] oppression" (Haddad, Lieberman 328). For instance, the norm for poor people is to be marginalized, exploited and ill-treated as is the case of Big Boy and Mann in *Uncle Tom's Children*, Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and Richard in *Black Boy*. They are all put aside of social welfare because of public

discriminatory conventions. As a result, failing to have equal power to fight against what could be called conventional injustice, these characters make use of mavericks to defy what the dominant social group imposes on them. This consists precisely in reacting to alienating political ideologies with communism which is yet supposed to protect them against capitalism, or in refusing to conform to public stereotypes, or in questioning laws, traditions, habits and collective moral values.

When it comes to an unconventional attitude to communism, it should be noted that although Wright saw communism as a springboard for the liberation of the oppressed from the yoke of their dispossessors, he did not let himself be led blindly by the ideals of the Communist Party. Since Wright had a critical and uncompromising mind, he did not hesitate to castigate some inadequacies of communism in the lives of those it claimed to free. Such a position put Wright in an uncomfortable position because of his propensity to criticize even those on his own side. This can be glimpsed at in *American Hunger* when he says:

I had embraced their [communists'] aims with the freest impulse I had ever known. I, the chary cynic, the man who had felt that no idea on earth was worth self-sacrifice, had publicly identified myself with them, and now their suspicion of me hit me with a terrific impact, froze me within. I groped in the noon sun. [...] They were more fearful of my idea than they would have been had I held a gun on them; they could have taken the gun away from me and shot me with it, but they did not know what to do with ideas." (AH, 86)

Here, Wright criticizes communists for their attempts to prevent him from intellectualism. But as Wright states, they could not do so because, while he could be dispossessed of material possession, his ideas remain his soft belongings that no-one could dispossess of him. One can thus understand that ideas enabled Wright to move from material dispossession to intellectual possession.

Wright can really be seen as an elusive individual in that he was difficult to pin down. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, while exposing the liberating potential which communist values can represent, Wright highlights in *American Hunger* a few flaws which mark communism. In communist principles, one often speaks of democratic centralism, that is, when the community decides and leaders endorse decisions, all members must comply with. Wright did not fail to point out the shortcomings of such a practice insofar as community or ideological leaders can err or abuse their positions to deprive individuals of their rights of public expression. Moreover, Wright did not necessarily present communism as an absolute panacea for the liberation of the oppressed. On the contrary, even if communism may look like a great opportunity, Wright put a damper on it by showing that what is seen as a great

opportunity can sometimes turn into disillusionment. *Native Son* conveys all this by presenting a character, Bigger Thomas, who enjoys all the sympathy of communists but who ends up realizing their limits, hence the adoption of an unconventional attitude against them.

Communism advocates for total submission to the rhetoric and orthodoxy of the ideology. Persistent dissent is not really a shared value in this ideology. Yet, Wright describes Bigger's relationship with communists to reveal that while they claim to defend Bigger, they struggle to truly understand his inner life and his overall relationship with the members of the dominant class. This misunderstanding makes Bigger suspicious of those who claim to want to free him from the chains of dispossession. So, Bigger decides to operate to counter the communist discourse. While the communist ideology is everywhere in *Native Son*, Bigger challenges it by expressing his frustration and mistrust of its defenders (McCann 93). The complicated relationship which prevails between Bigger and his communist friends reflects the complicated relationship that Wright himself had with members of the Communist Party. For example, Wright was faced with communists' forbidding him to write autobiographies and biographies, while writing was the only tool which could move him from dispossession to possession. Wright accounts for this difficult situation in *American Hunger*:

Then political problems rose to plague me. Ross, whose life I had tried to write, was charged by the Communist party with 'anti-leadership tendencies,' 'class collaborationist attitudes,' and 'ideological factionism,' phrases so fanciful that I gaped when I heard them. And it was rumored that I, too, would face similar charges. It was known that I had visited Ross, had taken notes on his life, and it was believed that I had been politically influenced by him, though in what way was not stated. As before, the more I tried to explain the guiltier I seemed in the eyes of my comrades. (*AH*, 87)

Following such events, Wright surely understood that communism was only the beginning to lead to the individual liberation of the oppressed, contrary to communists, as he understood them, who perceived communism as an end *per se*. Even if Wright believed "communism was the most effective path to solidarity between workers of all races" (Rowley 80), he put a damper by stating in his "Blue Print for Negro Writing" that "For the Negro writer, Marxism was the starting point. After Marxism had laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones out of his will to live"<sup>184</sup> (Wright, 1937, 447). Wright,

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<sup>184</sup> This statement really marks Wright's ideological crossing the "door of no return." The fundamental principle of Marxism is to go through socialism to prepare people for communism. As Haddad and Liebermann explain, we need socialism "to reshape man, to get rid of selfishness, his *Selbstsucht*, and to turn him into the altruistic person communism requires (328)." In other words, communism is the final stage of human history, not a passage as Wright believed. Once Marxism is fully carried to its final stage, that is communism, there is no more any planting flesh upon any bone, for communism is supposed to be the final and perfect stage.



just like Bigger in *Native Son*, saw communism as a passage to true liberation which even included the liberation of the individual from the dictates of the community that communism so dearly defended without understanding the intrinsic problems the individual could experience in a context of social, moral and economic dispossession. From this point of view, it becomes clear that, although Wright was initially carried away by communism, he was progressively breaking away from it to repossess his individual self, and one can perceive it in *Native Son*.

In general, communists are blind or ignorant of the dispossessed as individuals, as their relationship with Bigger testifies. At first, communists try to convince people to join the Communist Party as the only possible alternative to their problems by exposing arguments and an attitude which convince Bigger from the outset. The problem is, however, that communists' authoritative discourse keeps them from understanding Bigger in all his individuality and fails to give him the possibility of expressing himself. This is what happens when Max and Jan monopolize the debates without allowing Bigger to express his own feelings. That is the reason why when communists Mary and Jan try to convince Bigger to rally their revolutionary propaganda, he stays psychologically away from them, just answering very shortly, or not answering at all (McCann 99): "Bigger, what're you telling these people?" Jan asks. "Bigger did not answer." "Bigger, tell 'em when I left the car." "Bigger said nothing" (NS, 145). Bigger behaves this way because he is aware of the communists' naïveté who fail to see the huge barrier between him and them (McCann 98-99). He just wants them to leave him alone and to achieve that goal, he refuses any dialogue with their exuberant discourse of revolutions (99).

From close analysis, it can be said that *Native Son* expresses the failed encounter between Bigger and communism, which further illustrates Wright's own rejection of the Communist Party. Despite being supported by communists, Bigger does not trust them and is never in coherent dialogue with them as he resents being represented by communist Max and wants to do things by himself (101, 103). While communist Max tries to make Bigger explain his murder, Bigger is aware that it is impossible because it would imply telling his whole life as the narrative reveals:

Bigger rose and went to the window. His hands caught the cold street bars in a hard grip. He knew as he stood there that he could never tell why he had killed. It was not that he did not really want to tell, but the telling of it would have involved the telling of his entire life. The actual killing of Mary and Bessie was not what concerned him most; it was knowing and feeling that he could never make anybody know what had driven him to it. (NS, 242)

As Bigger is aware that nobody can really understand his criminal impulse, he is convinced that his case is being used by Max as a tool for communist orthodoxy (NS, 104). No communist can explain Bigger's actions and even though Max believes he can, he finally fails as Bigger is sentenced to death, which symbolically implies communists' failure (McCann 106). It is true that Bigger finally explains why he killed but he does not do it at the time communist Max and Jan ask him to. He rather speaks at an unexpected time, that is when Max is leaving the prison cell, which reveals his refusal to be controlled by the communist authoritative discourse (NS, 107). In addition to his reluctance to fully trust the communists who defend them, Bigger and other characters attempt to sidestep the stereotypical attitude that dominant morals and laws have imposed on them.

In modern societies, ancestral moral values have been turned into laws which every member of society is expected to abide by. To paraphrase Jean Jacques Rousseau, by respecting the law that the whole society has prescribed for itself, man becomes free (Rousseau, 1762). However, Rousseau warns about the need for everyone to abide by the law, otherwise it loses the goal of freedom for which it is enforced. In his *Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right*, Rousseau extols the merits of the law but clearly warns:

The laws of justice [...] merely make for the good of the wicked and the undoing of the just, when the just man observes them towards everybody and nobody observes them towards him. Conventions and laws are therefore needed to join rights to duties and refer justice to its object. (Rousseau 27)

As Rousseau states, laws are meant to set boundaries and regulate acceptable behavior but individuals may choose not to respect the law when they are unjust. Law is supposed to be morally just but they can sometimes exclude morality when they are designed in a way to discriminate against some individuals. In Wright's works under study, it is made clear that there is a two-tier legal system, that is one for the dominant group and another for the dominated and two Gods in a so-called monotheist religion.

In *Native Son*, Wright castigates American religiosity and morality as incongruent with natural law and denounces the fact that there are two Gods (one for Blacks and one for Whites) within a monotheist faith, which reveals contradictions in American society and justifies Bigger's disrespect for the law (Stiepanow 129). As Justyna Stiepanow further contends,

[Wright is] mocking the positive morality of the South as incongruent with the Creator's 'unalienable Rights' (as phrased by the Framers). [...] The hypocrisy of a religious devotion that, nevertheless, does not exclude diehard racism within the Bible

Belt is evident in these words: the oxymoronic co-existence of two Gods within a monotheistic faith reflects the contradiction. (129-130)

Stiepanow's comment is evidenced in *Black Boy* when Richard declares: "in Dixie, there are white churches and black churches, a white God and a black God" (*BB*, 11). Bigger is so exasperated by such a situation that he rejects any God altogether, ordering the preacher to "take [his] Jesus and go" (*NS*, 267). In fact, Bigger's response stems from his feeling that even divine law is made discriminatory by the dominant group and Wright denounces, through Max, how wrong has been turned into law to oppress other people.

Because he has been denied humanness by the law, Bigger tries to regain control by crossing the lines drawn by this law (Stiepanow 134). He transgresses the boundaries of the law as a result of frustrations. Stiepanow perceives this transgression as reflecting the attitude of all dispossessed African Americans who, functioning in a territory imposed on them, act against reason and self-preservation, cross boundaries, and show nonchalance instead of the expected submission to unjust laws. Bigger was born out of this reality, which leads him to plan robbing Blum, which, apart from being a violation of criminal code, is an attempt to possess money through unconventional ways. According to Stiepanow, the individual falls into lawlessness when the law fails to provide equal standards of being to all subjects; tension arises between the law and dispossessed individuals, which is consistent with Bigger's crime aiming at defying the psychological oppression of morally ambivalent laws<sup>185</sup> (136).

Every society has a set of moral values that govern acceptable behaviors in public spaces. When a member of society respects these values, he is seen as a good person, but when he deviates from them, it can be said of him that he is immoral or at least that he is unconventional to morality. In the fictional context of *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, individuals who violate or disobey societal moral values are the most dispossessed and oppressed. Analyzing *Native Son*, Stanton argues that "to be a good person, one must first be a person [...]. To become a person, one has to act [...]. The morality imposed upon Bigger confines him to shame-ridden non-existence by prohibiting any significant act, except crime" (Stanton 53). This means disobedience to moral values is the expression of moral non-conformism aimed at protesting against social, economic and political exclusion and regaining

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<sup>185</sup> One saying goes that the law is the law, which implies that even though one does not agree with the law, one must abide by it. However, taking *Native Son* as a corpus, Stiepanow shows how American law pressured black minorities into rejecting it. In *Native Son*, Bigger is initially submissive and respectful of the law until it makes him psychologically fly off. *Native Son* reveals all the territorialization of Jim Crow laws which reveals all the "psychological limitations imposed on Bigger by the system through its normative institutions. These institutions denied Bigger the most fundamental natural rights, a sense of belonging and kinship" (Stiepanow 134). It is such limitations that finally trigger Bigger's criminal act aiming at reaching some sense of belonging or identity.

lost citizenship. This non-conformism is manifested in several ways in the lives of the dispossessed.

Excessive pleasure is one of the characteristics of disobedience to the established moral order. It is true that no one wishes to shun his pleasure, but pleasures which appear to be an assault on the moral order are considered unconventional or non-conformist. Among these pleasures are prominently extravagant sexual practices, moral debauchery, indecency and excess of sensual pleasures and alcoholism. From this point of view, Mary is unconventional as she gets “drunk” in her mother’s words (*NS*, 108). While in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* the communities in which Bigger and Richard live are highly religious and concerned with the preservation of moral values, they do not hesitate to trample on those values through morally reprehensible behavior. For instance, Bigger distinguishes himself in masturbation in the theater (*NS*, 36-37), an act Ellis views as “a moral defiance of societal decorum” (Ellis 194), while Richard and his comrades practice voyeurism according to his own words:

We would crouch at the foot of the slope and look up, a distance of twenty-five feet or more, at the secret and fantastic anatomies of black, brown, yellow, and ivory men and women. For hours we would laugh, point, whisper, joke, and identify our neighbors by signs of their physiological oddities, commenting upon difficulty or projectile force of their excretion. Finally, some grownups would see us and drive us away with disgusted shouts. (*BB*, 26)

Richard and his comrades’ voyeurism takes place when they are abandoned by their mothers at home, which implies that their mischievous behavior expresses their unconventional response to lack of parental presence and love. By practicing voyeurism, they can gain some sense of love and pleasure which their parents failed to provide them. The rest of the narrative reveals that despite being driven away by grown-ups, Richard and his comrades keep on coming back, even if these practices question their respectability in society.

One of the behaviors, which can result in respectability being called into question, is dishonesty. Dishonesty especially manifests itself in the lives of Wright’s characters through lies and theft. The lies are used to protest against dispossession without getting caught or punished by dispossessors. Lying enables them to possess the truth and keep it away from their oppressors. This unconventional strategy is widely implemented by Bigger and Richard. For Bigger, the lie consists in playing the shy boy in the Daltons’ family to better implement his non-conformist plans against them. Bigger particularly lies on Jan as a communist and succeeds in turning the gaze of the police at him as a criminal (*NS*, 143). Actually, Bigger’s lying confirms that he is drawing the picture the way he wants for his dispossessors (*NS*, 137). As for

Richard, the lie is used to penetrate the world of knowledge in order to better understand his dispossessing environment and to counter it. To achieve that goal, he borrows Falk's library card and lies that he has been sent by a white man to get access to awareness-raising books for reading (*BB*, 273-274). Even Reverend Dan Taylor in *Uncle Tom's Children*, who is supposed to embody the Christian orthodoxy of an honest life, lies because Whites oblige him to do so as the narrative evidences:

'Yeah,' he said, his voice low and husky.  
'Go in tell them white folks Ahm sick, hear?'  
She stepped back from him and shook her head.  
'Gawd ain wid yuh when yuh lie, Dan!'  
'We *gotta* lie t white folks! Theys on our necks! They make us lie t them! Whut kin we do but lie?' (*UTC*, 140).

Honesty is not the best shared value among those who live under dispossession. It is for fear of violence that Reverend Taylor lies. Even if one of their own is at odds with the law or with moral values, the dispossessed characters adopt the strategy of non-denunciation to protect him from violence. Non-denunciation as a strategy is projected in *Uncle Tom's Children* where Big Boy's community and Sue refuse to denounce Big Boy and Johnny-Boy, respectively, even though they are guilty of wrongdoings. Following Big Boy's murder of Jim, his family decides to disobey the law and send him to Chicago to keep him from being lynched (*UTC*, 39).

Disobedience to the moral values of society reaches its peak with Bigger's murder of Mary Dalton. It is true that the crime he commits against Mary Dalton is an illegal act, but the fact of cutting the corpse into several pieces and burning them goes beyond illegality to present this crime as an immoral climax arousing turmoil in the white as well as the black community. Bigger's burning of Mary's body can be seen as a profanation of corpse and appears as a real challenge of human dignity. Not entirely satisfied with having killed his victim, Bigger steals her money, which is a violation of moral and social regulations, and schemes a ransom note to further crook her parents (*NS*, 85). While his act provokes public uproar, Bigger refuses to feel remorse or guilt. He even fights against such feelings (*NS*, 244), and finds in his crime an identity he is proud of, which expresses his contempt for the moral values of the society which discriminates and dispossesses him. Since Bigger does not see himself as a full member of society, he has created his own morality poles apart from those established and recognized by society. Then arises what can be considered as a conflict of values (Brivic, 1974), resulting from Bigger's desire to get out of the moral constraints imposed on him by society (Stanton 56,

57). This is a way of moving from dispossession to repossession as he crosses out his former identity imposed on him by society and repossesses a new one he has shaped for himself.

Conflict of values occurs when a given social group feels excluded from the universal values established by society. In these conditions, this group finds itself deprived of values and therefore devoid of any humanity. What characterizes people and distinguishes them from animals is their reason and the set of socio-moral values they create to determine themselves and their relationship with others. One can say in a few words that a person without values can be compared to an animal, because values make humans. But when values are put out of the reach of marginalized individuals, they create particular values they can possess, even though they can sometimes be conflicting with those established by society. That is why Bigger has no regrets after his murder because he does not feel concerned by the values of peace and respect for the lives of others that society has set, and because he has set his own standards which lead him to the path of repossession.

While society advocates for universal values, Bigger and others are excluded from them and simply viewed in terms of stereotypes which Richard, in *Black Boy*, tries in every way not to conform to. Although the majority of *Black Boy*'s characters conform and adapt to stereotypes, Richard leads his own peaceful rebellion and develops initiatives to escape stereotypes, which is also a way of moving to repossession. For example, when he enters the store and witnesses an oppressed woman being beaten up by Whites, he denounces this incident in his home environment in the hope of provoking public protest (*UTC*, 9), which is unconventional because maltreating is taken for granted by the dominant group. In such circumstances, oppressed individuals' public denouncement or protest can be viewed by the dominant group as defiance to conventions, which puts the denouncer or protester at risk of being lynched.

### **3. The Risks of Defying Conventions**

The non-conformism of Wright's characters, especially those belonging to the youth, results in negative consequences at several levels, including the educational one. When children adopt non-conformist behavior, they encounter a number of circumstances unfavorable to the pursuit of their schooling. The first consequence of non-conformism is isolation from the family, the community, society and its rules. Since an unconventional behavior puts children at odds with established rules, they are bullied in a way that forces them to flee their usual

surroundings to seek refuge in another environment offering safety but, at the same time, depriving them of formal education. Examples of non-conformist children forced to drop out school abound in Wright's works.

In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Big Boy and his classmates are enrolled in their community's school and they usually go there together. However, when they decide to violate Jim's private swimming pool instead of showing up to school, they get caught up in a fight with the owner of the place which results in his death. As a consequence, afraid of lynching, Big Boy's family is forced to organize his escape to Chicago, which implies the end of his primary education. Similarly, in *Black Boy*, Richard puts himself at odds with his family members and particularly with his aunt Granny who is responsible for his studies. The multiple inappropriate behaviors such as the refusal to respect the racial status quo, and to practice Granny's religion, but also the use of bad language against her ends up convincing Granny not to take care of her grandson's schooling anymore. Thus, Richard is forced to drop out school very early to find a job in order to ensure his own survival. When he finds his way back to school some time later, his conflicts with his teacher Aunt Maggie lead her to ignore him in the classroom, a situation which affects Richard psychologically to such an extent that he considers taking the path back to the street where he could feel freer. Richard's non-conformist behavior in his family circle negatively impacts not only his formal education but also his personal upbringing.

Being non-conformists isolates the characters from their families and has a direct impact on their education and learning. They are forced to find their solace in street life where they forge their own upbringing<sup>186</sup>. Ultimately, they develop the mentality of abandoned street children, which aggravates their feelings of revolt against society. One can still remember that Bigger's disagreements with his mother in *Native Son* result in his spending more time on the streets than at home. It is in the streets that Bigger learns about individual toughness which is often found in intra-gang violence such as the one between him and Gus, and in burglary projects such as the one planned against Blum, the white merchant. In a nutshell, non-conformism causes the end or decline of formal education, which prevents non-conformists from building themselves up as individuals (Vogel 196) and often leads them down the wrong

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<sup>186</sup> In *Black Boy*, Richard explains the reason why no-one could any longer change him in his family by the fact that he has already shaped his own upbringing in the street. For instance, he learnt to curse and practice voyeurism in the street and these street values have become part of his personality. Richard's himself recognizes that bad language comes from his difficult childhood as he learnt to curse before learning to read (*BB*, 109). He also recognizes a childhood period when he and his comrades used to hide and look at naked people (*BB*, 26). That is the reason why Granny's efforts to get him back to the conventional social track are all doomed to failure, because his upbringing has already been completed by the street. For more on Richard's street life, see Fabre's *Richard Wright, La Quête Inachevée*, (1986).

path as Richard himself recognizes in *Black Boy* when he mentions his “life had switched onto the wrong track” (*BB*, 168). Family and community isolation is partly to be blamed for that.

One of the fundamental elements in the consequences of non-conformism for Wright’s characters remains family and community isolation. In fact, the non-conformist characters were born in families and communities where conformist practices, traditions and habits are already well-established and taken for granted. By wanting to reform social traditions and habits, dissident characters trigger an open conflict between themselves and traditionalists. Richard in *Black Boy*, for example, chooses non-conformist writing to provoke reforms in his community’s tradition of subservience but his action causes his community’s dismay which finds that “nothing is more alien than writing or the desire to express one’s self in writing” (*BB*, 121). As a result, his community “could not understand why anyone would want to write a story” (*BB*, 167). As one can notice, instead of getting Richard closer to his kinsmen, non-conformist writing makes him more distant from them (Wilhite 114), and the reader is made to understand this reality through Richard’s own testimony:

Above all, they could not understand why I called it *The Voodoo of Hell’s Half Acre*. The mood out of which a story was written was the most alien thing conceivable to them. They looked at me with new eyes, and a distance, a suspiciousness came between us. I had thought anything in writing a story, I had thought that perhaps it would make me more acceptable to them, and now it is cutting me off from them more completely than ever” (*BB*, 167).

Likewise, in *Native Son*, following Bigger’s non-conformist act, his community members deem him guilty and, as one conversation between two Blacks reveals, they are ready to denounce him whenever opportunity shows up:

‘Jack, yuh mean t’ stan’ there ‘n’ say yuh’d give tha’ nigger up t’ the white folks?’  
‘Damn right I would!’  
‘But Jack, s’pose he ain’ guilty?’  
‘Whut in hell he run off fer then?’  
‘Mabbe he thought they wuz gonna blame the murder on him!’  
‘Lissen, Jim. Ef he wuzn’t guilty, then he oughta stayed ‘n’ faced it. Ef I knowed where tha’ nigger wuz Ah d turn ‘im up ‘n’ git these white folks off me.’ (*NS*, 204-205).

This conversation reveals how abandoned Bigger becomes following his murder. Without even considering any hypothesis according to which he may be guiltless, some of Bigger’s community members blame him and are ready to sell him off to the police. When Bigger hears this conversation from his hiding place, he certainly becomes aware that he has to fight for himself, for he can no longer rely on his family or community which, henceforth, have isolated him the same way they have isolated Richard in *Black Boy*.



While Richard feels isolated by his family due to his rebellious attitude, he is determined to pursue his own path in seeking to acquire professional skills that will free him from economic dispossession. Nonetheless, Richard seems to have lost sight of the reality that acquiring professional skills for a person like him is seen by members of the dominant group as one of the most unconventional acts, since such skills are their preserve. Consequently, wanting to learn a trade comes up against the strong will of the dominant group who isolates him from this personal initiative. Richard walks into an optical shop looking for a job and is fortunate enough to meet a white boss who is willing to give him the chance to learn professional skills. But the white boss has not apparently taken into account Peace and Morris's determination to make life difficult for Richard from the first moments of his apprenticeship. By dint of moral and psychological harassment, they succeed in isolating Richard from the workshop which they consider booked for Whites<sup>187</sup>. Richard, therefore, becomes a *persona non grata* in his own living environment. From that moment on, Donald Gibson maintains that Richard is neither part of the white community nor of the black community. He is simply lonely (Gibson 63), just like Wright himself whose "feeling of loneliness and apartness became an organic part of his reality" (Hannush 52). One can agree with Gibson's analysis since not only is he no longer welcomed in his own family where Granny considers him a "devil" (*BB*, 185-186), where his uncle Tom instructs his daughter Maggie to stay away from him (*BB*, 191), but he is also rejected by the white community who denies him any professional learning opportunity considered an exclusively white privilege, and plunges him into a feeling of orphanage. Richard, indeed, says: "I felt that I had been slapped out of the human race. When I reached home, I did not tell the family what had happened; I merely told them that I had quit, that I was not making enough money, that I was seeking another job" (*BB*, 210).

It can be argued that Richard's non-conformist attitude has really plunged him into a sort of social orphanage just like Bigger in *Native Son* who feels abandoned by his family and community following his accidental murder of Mary. This situation mirrors well Wright's own life when he still lived in Southern United States with his parents. Like Richard in *Black Boy* who is isolated by his own family and community suspecting him of his contempt for Jim Crowist social norms, Wright was also faced with the same circumstances of isolation which

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<sup>187</sup> Peace and Morrie work out a trap against Richard by accusing him of calling Peace without adding "Sir", knowing that he will be faced with a dilemma because if he admits the fault, they will have the right to chase him out of the shop for impoliteness, but if he denies, they will still have the right to dismiss him for hinting they are liars. Indeed, Richard gets psychologically mixed up and is finally obliged to resign from the optical shop despite the boss's efforts to keep him. This episode in *Black Boy* seriously impacts on Richard in a way that he is no longer sure he will ever get an opportunity to get out of economic despondency.

led him from Natchez to Chicago via Memphis until his final exile to Paris<sup>188</sup>. Actually, *Black Boy* projects this painful episode in Wright's life and demonstrates how the fight against dispossession by using non-conformism is strewn with pitfalls ranging from family and community exclusion to permanent exile. Even when non-conformist characters are not forced into exile, they are faced with politico-judicial persecution.

Non-conformism lays bare the policy of dispossession organized and implemented by the dominant group to perpetuate their interests and non-conformist characters constitute a constant danger to politicians who use politico-judicial persecution to track them down and put their acquired interests out of harm's way. Whether the characters are politically engaged people or not, whenever their actions threaten the political stability of the ruling class, they become the privileged targets of oppressive forces to secure political stability. Sometimes, politico-judicial persecution takes a form of propaganda used to reap more political dividends as is the case in *Native Son*. In this work, the murderous act of Bigger who is related to Jan, the communist, unleashes the anger of the political system against communist militants whom they accuse of supporting and participating in crimes committed by dissidents. One of the obvious examples is the case of Buckley, the lawyer and politician, who keeps on accusing communists of crimes (*NS*, 269). Buckley blames Jan Erlone for eating, shaking hands with "Negroes" and making them believe they have the same rights as Whites, denounces and even castigates communism (*NS*, 251-253). Following Bigger's crime, Buckley even goes so far as to try and force him to accuse Jan simply because he is a communist, which signals political persecution. Actually, Bigger's non-conformist act does business for Buckley who can use it to ensure his own election, a situation Jan fervently denounces: "You're afraid you won't be able to kill this boy before the April elections, if we handle his case, aren't you? Jan asked" (*NS*, 230).

The fact for Jan and Max to defend Bigger is a non-conformist act which leads the political system, represented by Buckley and the police, to persecute communists while wondering how on earth they can defend such murderous people like Bigger. If it appears disgusting for dominant politicians that white communists support Blacks' struggles against dispossession, what is more disgusting is Blacks' commitment in the Communist Party which

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<sup>188</sup> Fabre explains that Wright's exile to Paris has nothing to do with economic problems as his economic situation in the United States was not so bad to push him to exile. Rather, Wright felt the pressure coming not only from his own community but also from white political leaders who put him under FBI surveillance. Wright was conscious that his feeling of insecurity in the United States was linked to his protest writings and conferences against the ongoing oppressive system in the country. Fabre further suggests that because Wright feared he would have to be interviewed by the US senatorial committee on anti-American activities, he finally resolved to flee to France which he considered as the land of freedom and human rights.

For more on the circumstances of Wright's exile to France, see Fabre (1986) *op. cit.*

is perceived by the dominant group as one of the most harmful non-conformist acts. The members of the dominant group do not simply ask bitter questions such as “how in hell you Reds can get out of bothering with a black thing like that?” (*NS*, 229). Rather, they act in a way to convince black communist militants or sympathizers to withdraw or else they risk being killed.

In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, there is really no such questions to a black communist as to know why he got engaged in or sympathize with communism. Instead, the threat of death is levied against him as it takes place in the short story “Bright and Morning Star” where the sheriff and his collaborators simply order Sue to come with a paper to collect her communist son, Johnny-Boy, because they will kill him when they catch him in a demonstration. Whereas extra-judicial lynching is promised to non-conformist characters in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, some of the dominant group’s politicians such as Buckley do everything in their power to get them sentenced to death in *Native Son*.

In addition to the political persecution that non-conformism triggers, non-conformist characters are also faced with judicial prosecution as is the case of Bigger in *Native Son*. One could say that there has been some progress in dealing with non-conformism in *Native Son* since Bigger is brought to justice as opposed to the other non-conformist cases in *Uncle Tom’s Children* where extra-judicial lynching is systematically carried out. Nevertheless, most critics commonly agree that even though systematic lynching is not used in *Native Son*, the judicial procedure is only a masquerade as Bigger is not granted fair and transparent trial<sup>189</sup>. For instance, Bennett Capers criticizes this judicial system as a symbol of the dominant class’s power embodied in Buckley, and further contends that the law as a whole is blind to Bigger’s situation and is simply implemented in a way to keep Blacks from transgressing the color line (Capers 218; 231). Pursuant to Capers, Elmer concludes that Bigger is used just as a symbol, not a person, against non-conformist attitudes toward the prevailing socio-political establishment (Elmer 776). When Bigger’s mother beseeches the rich woman, Mrs. Dalton, to save her son she replies that things are beyond her control now (*NS*, 137), which is a signal that

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<sup>189</sup> Indeed, one can fully agree with those who perceive unfairness in Bigger’s trial, because one of the dominant themes that Wright projects in *Native Son* is the ambivalence of the American judicial system. Wright shows that there is a two-tier judicial system in America and one can understand his standpoint since premeditated crime against Bessie is not judged while an accidental murder on Mary is judged and the author sentenced to death. One can further perceive the flaws of American judicial system in the fact that Bigger’s lawyer is given a very short period of time to prepare his defense. This is certainly done on purpose to keep the lawyer from gathering sufficient evidence which could permit him to save his client from death sentence. What is surer is that it is Bigger’s non-conformist act that results in the judicial system, however flawed it may be, hurrying his trial to sentence him to death so that it could serve as a deterrent example for future non-conformists.

no wealth can save Bigger from the judicial consequences of his murder, namely death sentence encouraged by vigilantes and the local press.

Bigger's non-conformism unleashes media consequences which help boost the seriousness of his act and worsen the penalties provided by the judicial establishment. Indeed, non-conformist acts attract media bodies which are in the pay of the dominant group and are responsible for spreading information according to biased versions provided by the dominant group. In other words, to paraphrase Elmer, the media and television in particular turn the non-conformist acts of those who are dispossessed into spectacle and, thus, contribute to subsequent hatred against them. When Bigger's murder takes place, he attracts journalists from all quarters and triggers media campaign against him. From this point of view, Gibson remarks that Bigger is caught up by the media hunger which misrepresents him (Gibson 95). On closer inspection, one will agree with Gibson since, as the narrative shows, the newspapers convey erroneous information about communists' participation in Bigger's murder (*NS*, 82), and describes Bigger with contempt. One need only read this passage from *Native Son* to be convinced of the media lynching that Bigger's murder causes against him:

An Irish police captain remarked with deep conviction: 'I'm sure death is the only cure for the likes of him.' [...] From Jackson, Mississippi, came a report yesterday from Edward Robertson, editor of the Jackson Daily Star, regarding Bigger Thomas' boyhood there. The editor wired:

'Thomas comes from a poor darky family of a shiftless and immoral variety. He was raised here and is known to local residents as an irreformable sneak thief and liar.' [...] 'Our experience here in Dixie with such depraved types of Negroes has shown that only death penalty, inflicted in a public and dramatic manner, has any influence on their peculiar mentality.' [...] 'I think it but proper to inform you that in many quarters it is believed that Thomas, despite his dead-black complexion, may have a minor portion of white blood in his veins, a mixture which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature' [...].

'Still another psychological deterrent can be attained by conditioning Negroes so that they have to pay deference to the white person with whom they come in contact. This is done by regulating their speech and actions.' (*NS*, 222-223)

This excerpt is just one portion of the media lynching that Bigger's murder provokes for him before he is tried in court. Bigger himself realizes the magnitude of his act through the media and now understands that this act has resulted in hatred between the dispossessed and members of the dominant group. This awareness convinces him that he will be killed but what Bigger regrets more is not being killed but rather this media game organized around his own person. The media can be compared to a pack of wolves having fun with their prey before killing and devouring it. The narrative clearly shows Bigger's frustration: "He lowered the paper; he could not read more. Yes, they were going to kill him; but they were having this sport with him before

they did it. He held very still” (*NS*, 223). This media lynching causes psychological damage among non-conformist characters and severely impacts their lives.

Violence has psychological effects not only on those who perpetuate it but also on those who endure it. In the case of violent non-conformist acts, the perpetrator also suffers from psychological consequences because of social and political pressure. That is the reason why despite Bigger’s rebirth after his crime, the image of Mary’s dead body still troubles him psychologically to an extent that he gets close to self-destruction (Brivic 235). For Brivic, Bigger knows at the conscious level that he will be killed if he troubles a white girl. Yet he does it, which is a kind of suicide to escape from his alienated life (236). What Brivic likens to psychological suicide results from psychological weakness or psychological mortification which is perceptible in some characters’ attitudes in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Black Boy* (Caper 114-149).

After killing the cat in *Black Boy*, Richard is maltreated in a way that ushers him into psychological trauma. In fact, Richard’s mother obliges him to go out into the night and bury the killed cat, which is psychologically too demanding for a young boy like him (*BB*, 19). Since he has no choice, he obeys his mother but plunges into a situation of constant fear and nightmares. Richard explains how his mother’s reaction to his act is calculated and puts emotional pressure on him:

But my mother, being more imaginative, retaliated with an assault upon my sensibilities that crushed me with the moral horror involved in taking a life. All that afternoon she directed toward me calculated words that sprawl in my mind a horde of invisible demons bent upon exacting vengeance for what I had done. As evening drew near, anxiety filled me and I was afraid to go into an empty room alone. (*BB*, 19)

This passage shows that in Richard’s family non-conformism results in mental aggression which provokes psychological trauma as Richard experiences it. One can see that the family members’ reaction to Richard’s actions is disproportionate as it keeps him from sleeping because of the “huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above [him]” (*BB*, 13) that he can see in his imagination. All these disproportionate reactions to Richard’s non-conformist actions participate in his future daydreaming at the orphanage house during domestic works (*BB*, 37), his nightmares and sleepwalking (*BB*, 98), his unstable emotional life (*BB*, 112), and his growing silent and reserve at work (*BB*, 181). Richard’s instability reminds of Bigger’s after his murder.

Bigger is no less psychologically troubled than Richard after his violent act. Because it is conducive to physical death, Bigger appears to be more psychologically shocked than

Richard. Just like Richard, Bigger is mentally tortured after killing Mary to such an extent that he assumes the cat can denounce him, which subsequently pushes him into sleepless nights:

A noise made him whirl; two green whirling pools, pools of accusation and guilt, stared at him from a white blur that sat perched upon the edge of the trunk. His mouth opened in a silent scream and his body became hotly paralyzed. It was the white cat [...]. It seemed to Bigger that no sooner had he closed his eyes than he was wide awoken again, suddenly and violently, as though someone had grabbed his shoulders and had shaken him. He laid on his back, in bed, hearing and seeing nothing. (NS, 84, 87)

Bigger is no longer a master of himself on the crime scene as he displays panicky attitudes and even develops what could be called schizophrenic behaviors towards his immediate environment. It is remarkable from this excerpt that Bigger's attitude after Mary's murder and Bessie's crime is quite different and one can wonder why Bigger is more destabilized by a murder than a crime. The answer surely comes from the fact that he is aware that Mary's murder will result in more social and political pressure than Bessie's crime. And, indeed, the sequence of events proves him right as Bessie's crime is not judged but is only used to justify his death sentence for the murder of Mary. It is customary to say that the same causes produce the same effects and this can be confirmed in *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom's Children*.

Actually, just as murder causes psychological turmoil in *Native Son*, it also plunges violent characters into a state of psychological instability. After Big Boy's murder of Jim, he is led to flee to Chicago but in his flight, like Bigger in *Native Son*, he experiences psychological distress as he is terrified by evil thoughts on his runaway (UTC, 40). While he tries to flee, Big Boy really has no psychological rest as he keeps on recalling the past (UTC, 43). Some characters as Mann even have blackouts after their escape. Following his crime against Heartfield, lights even scare Mann as they indicate, to him, a white man's presence. Mann tries to remember the past but nothing comes to his mind (UTC, 67) except Heartfield's body (UTC, 79), just as Richard and Bigger keep on remembering their victims' bodies which trouble them. Mann even reaches the peak of mental instability when he sits in a boat and is yet unaware of his presence in it:

He was again in the boat, beside Brinkley. Mrs Heartfield and the two children were in the back. The little girl was crying sleepily. The boat rocked. Mann looked at the house; it was slanting down to the water; the window through which he had just crawled was about a foot from the level of the rushing current. The motor rocked, but the roar came out from a long way off, from out of a deep silence, from out of a time long gone by. The boat slid over the water and he was in it; but it was a faraway boat, and it was someone else sitting in that boat; not he. He saw the light plunging ahead into the darkness and felt the lurch of the boat as it plowed through water. But none of it really touched him; he was beyond it all now; it simply passed in front of his eyes like silent,

moving shadows; like figures in a sick dream. He felt nothing, he sat, looking and seeing nothing. 'Yuh hardly made it,' said Brinkley. He looked at Brinkley as though surprised to see someone at his side. (*UTC*, 94)

This scene takes place when, upon killing Heartfield, Mann and Brinkley are sent back to Heartfield's house to save his wife and his children. Mann is aware that he will face Heartfield's child who witnessed him kill his father and that the child will surely denounce him to the police as the murderer of his father. Mann certainly imagines himself coming to an end in this mission and becoming psychologically dead before his physical death. That is why even though he is physically present in the boat, he is simply mentally and psychologically absent or, one could say, he is mentally and psychologically dead. Generally speaking, the likes of psychological absences Mann experiences are omens of the future physical suffering and subsequent death which follow non-conformism.

One of the very first visible consequences of non-conformism remains physical suffering and subsequent death due to the violent reaction of oppressive forces against activities aimed at fighting dispossession. In many cases, corporal punishment is carried out by conformists. The latter are generally at loggerheads with other non-conformist family members. In order to protect the peace of mind they enjoy, they submit to the conditions of dispossession, and do not hesitate to use corporal punishment against non-conformists. In such circumstances, they do not seek to understand the motivating forces which push non-conformists into rebellion, the rule among them being: since everyone abides by the social status quo, why will anyone else attempt to do the opposite?

In *Black Boy*, Richard, despite his young age, is revealed to be the most turbulent member and the one who challenges established family order by his unconventional behavior. By way of illustration, despite his grandmother's illness which commands silence in the house, Richard finds in this an attack on his freedom to play as a child, which leads him to burn the curtain in protest. This act is seen as dangerous by Ella who immediately takes it upon herself to show Richard that in the family, with each improper behavior, she will not hesitate to punish him physically. And, indeed, although he admits having made a mistake and is terrified by the certainty of being beaten, she beats Richard in a way that he even comes to doubt her maternal love (*BB*, 11). Analyzing the same scene, Howland asserts that Ella and the other conformist members of the family represent a whole oppressive force which traps Richard and leaves him no room for more non-conformist actions:

The flames quickly spread, choking Richard with smoke and making him gasp from their heat. He is terrified, not as much by the fire as by the inevitable beating it will bring [...]. Richard can escape neither from the burning house nor the terrible

punishment that awaits him [...]. Like the wisps of straws in the fireplace, he is trapped in a place from which there is no exit, and he is surrounded by deadly forces which inevitably will sear his flesh and his spirit. (Howland 122)

As can be deciphered from Howland's analysis, Richard's family is full of oppressive forces, the activation of which is brought about by his actions which do not abide by the established rules. In short, it is because he defies the law of silence by burning the curtain that Richard is cornered in a place with no exit, is caught and beaten up just like Bigger is cornered, caught and ill-treated by the mob in *Native Son*. The only difference between Richard and Bigger is that there is no family force capable of inflicting corporal punishment on Bigger due to his older age while Richard's family members can still inflict physical pain on him since he is a young boy.

However, it should be noted that corporal punishment is not justified only by the violent acts committed by family non-conformists. It is also used in cases of disturbance of family moral order and questioning of the established social order. In the case of *Black Boy*, when Richard disturbs the family moral order by asking his aunt Granny to lick his anus (*BB*, 48-51), the immediate consequence is corporal punishment which Richard denounces, thinking that it has become an educational standard among Black Americans. It is worth stopping for a while to examine the real motives lying behind family members' propensity for inflicting corporal punishment on Richard.

Granny and her children all live under Adventist Christian laws and intend to educate Richard according to the values of their religion. In the Christian religion, corporal punishment is an integral part of education. Several proverbs quoted in the Bible make it clear: "He who refuses to hit his son does not love him. He who loves him does not hesitate to punish him"<sup>190</sup> (Proverb 13:24); "Correct your children as long as you have the hope of helping them, but do not get so angry that you want them dead"<sup>191</sup> (Proverbs 18:19). It is, therefore, on behalf of these puritanical Christian laws that Granny and Ella entrust themselves the responsibility to punish Richard for his non-conformist acts which, supposedly, were induced by the devil. Apart from religion, it must also be noted that corporal punishment was a practice of Western education. Until early 20th century, man was considered to be an incomplete being at birth who needed to be trained to become able to control his emotions, passions and impulses. The use of corporal punishment was, thus, entirely justified. This form of violent education turns out to be

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<sup>190</sup> « Qui refuse de frapper son fils ne l'aime pas. Celui qui l'aime n'hésite pas à le punir. »

<sup>191</sup> « Corrige tes enfants tant que tu as l'espoir de les aider, mais ne t'emporte pas au point de vouloir leur mort. »



both religious and cultural. This is the education Richard receives to get him out of the state of nature, and to urge him to conform to prevailing social values.

After being severely beaten according to the traditional way of education following his obscene words against Granny, Richard understands that speech must be controlled and carefully selected according to the person he is talking to. Even when addressing his mother, he must select his words so as not to raise the issue of dispossession which can bring about physical molesting. This reality is, indeed, corroborated in *Black Boy*. In one scene, Ella answers several questions from Richard but when he asks her a question about deprivation, it irritates her and she ends up hitting him into silence to keep him from being too self-assertive vis-à-vis dispossessors who have enough power to trouble him more violently. It can, therefore, be said that the simple act of asking a question about dispossession is considered as the beginning of rebellion and is punished by physical violence regardless of age.

Even if some non-conformist characters are not physically punished in families thanks to their older age, this age criterion does not hold outside the family since they can suffer corporal punishment by the members of the dominant social group. Social rules are organized in favor of the dominant group which uses physical violence when they are challenged. In this context, neither age nor religious status can save non-conformists from the physical consequences of their actions. Some characters like Taylor, a prominent pastor in his community, learn it the hard way in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Taylor's original sin lies in his sympathizing with the cause of young communists who are planning a march to denounce food dispossession. A few members of the dominant group like the mayor try to convince Taylor not to interfere in the organization of the march and to convince the marchers to abandon their project. Taylor's stubbornness to side with the dispossessed group is ultimately seen as a non-conformist act which results in harsh corporal punishment on him. As the narrative reveals, despite his status as a Reverend, Taylor is tied up by six men and tortured in the bush. He is mocked by his torturers who ask him to pray like Jesus, as though to suggest that praying cannot save him from the consequences of his unconventional act. The following extract provides the reader a clearer picture of Taylor's physical suffering as a result of his rebellion:

He did not move. Again his arms were caught from behind and a kneecap came into the center of his back. Breathless, he dropped, his hands and knees cooling in the wet grass. He lifted his fingers to feel his swelling lips; he felt his wrists being grabbed and carried around the trunk of a tree. He held stiffly and struggled against the rope. [...] The whip lashed across his bare back, *wick!* He flinched and struggled against the rope that cut his wrists to the bone [...]. Each blow weakened him; each blow told him that soon he would give out. Warm blood seeped into his trousers, ran down his thighs. He felt he could not stand it any longer; he held his breath, his lungs swelling. Then he sagged, his

back a leaping agony of fire; leaping as of itself, as though it were his but he could not control it any longer. The weight of his body rested on his arms; his head dropped to one side. (*UTC*, 162-163)

This excerpt shows that Taylor's stance to the prevailing socio-economic status quo results in a physical pain he has never suffered before. As his head finally drops to one side, one can perceive some kind of biblical intertextuality between Jesus's suffering and Taylor's story. Just as Jesus's head dropped to his right side on the cross when he died, Taylor's head also drops to one side except that he does not die. The rest of the narrative reveals that Taylor loses consciousness but later comes round and gropes home. This episode of Taylor's life certainly teaches him that just as he asks his God to tear apart those who do not conform to His law, he is himself torn apart by those who have full control over society. For the reader, this episode makes it clear again that one of the immediate consequences of non-conformism to the established order is a variety of corporal punishments Reverend Taylor has never experienced in his life before. Sometimes, the consequences of non-conformism can go beyond those who are responsible for their acts and reach innocent people as is the case in *Native Son*.

The novel shows that it is sometimes not enough for characters to be innocent to escape harsh consequences. To escape, they should rather do everything to prevent non-conformism from occurring. Bigger's case speaks volumes about the collective punishment that is applied to innocent people. His murder results in his flight and subsequent persecution by police forces and vigilantes. Even though his community and communists did not participate in his murder and made no attempt to cover it up, they incur all the wrath of the mob coming from the dominant social group. The reader discovers this situation during Max's plea in court where he vehemently denounces collective corporal punishment against Bigger's community and communists:

The manner in which Bigger Thomas was captured, the hundreds of innocent Negro homes invaded, the scores of Negroes assaulted upon the streets, the dozens who were thrown out of their jobs, the barrage of lies poured out from every source against a defenseless people, all of this was something unheard of in democratic lands. The hunt of Bigger Thomas served as an excuse to terrorize the entire Negro population, to arrest hundreds of communists, to raid labor union quarters and workers' organizations. (*NS*, 299)

There can no longer be any doubt that collective political persecution against communists, Blacks, and trade unions exists and is denounced by Wright. Truly, while Max explains how innocent people who have nothing suffer from the consequences of a non-conformist act they did not pose, he also takes advantage to tackle American democracy which, for him, is the only one in the world where such injustices take place, simply because the dominant social group

wants to protect its authority and supremacy (Johnson 134). To do so, the dominant group is capable, if need be, of going beyond corporal punishment to kill some non-conformists.

The most serious and irreparable consequence of non-conformism is death. Death as a consequence of the non-conformist act is two-dimensional as it concerns those who undergo non-conformist acts and those who perform them. In Wright's works, death remains so ubiquitous that one wonders whether it has not become a trivial matter. In some cases, an act either leads to the death of the person who undergoes it, or the responsible is killed by the victim's defenders. Either way, the common denominator of violent non-conformist acts is death. But why do certain specific acts of this kind always result in death in Wright's novels? One reliable answer is that death occurs because those who are deprived of everything are determined against all odds to end dispossession and domination by every means at their disposal including crime, while the dispossessors stand by their guns, ready to kill in order to prevent any menace of their supremacy.

At the social level, those who have the means of production have risen up to the top of the social ladder thanks to a system of discrimination that they have established to exploit the poor. One of the rules of discrimination is the prohibition to venture into the social facilities of the dominant group and to rub shoulders with them without prior permission. Any behavior contrary to these rules is considered as non-conformist and deadly punished, as the three works show. In *Uncle Tom's Children*, Big Boy and Mann evade the social rule established by the dominant group by violating the private property of some of their members; as a consequence, they both find death (*UTC*, 102). Likewise, in *Native Son*, Bigger violates the prohibition on sexual contact between a member of the dominant group and that of the dominated group; he is thus sentenced to death (*NS*, 319), just as Bob is killed in *Black Boy* for having sex with a girl from the dominant group. While such deaths deepened Wright's consciousness of race relations in the South (Makombe 274), they make Richard in *Black Boy* understand that lynching is meant to keep non-conformists in their places (Tuhkanen 128-132), especially in their economic precariousness.

Economically, any attempt to compete with members of the dominant group is considered as a violently reprehensible act which does not correspond to the norm. In *Black Boy*, Uncle Hoskins is the early victim of this situation as he is assassinated after starting a thriving business which threatens the economic supremacy of the dominant group. Hoskins's situation can, to some extent, be compared to Silas's in *Uncle Tom's Children*. He works hard to get out of money shortage and even equal the members of the dominant group. He is close to reaching his objective when the white salesman intrudes in his house and attempts to rape

his wife Sarah, which later provokes a fight and finally causes his death. Silas's and Hoskins's policies, which consist in reaching equality through economic emancipation as suggested by Booker T. Washington, have failed because of the political supremacy of the dominant group<sup>192</sup>.

Politically, the dispossessed group has no right of decision since all decision-making power is confiscated by the dominant group. Aware of the importance of politics as it enables them to legislate and govern to maintain their supremacist position, the dominant group does not procrastinate in dealing with non-conformist acts tending to endanger their political power. Under these conditions, politically rebellious acts are likely to cause death, as is clearly projected in *Native Son* and in *Uncle Tom's Children* in particular. In this work, Sue and Johnny-Boy are two characters strongly engaged in communist activities, a situation considered to be highly non-conformist and which results in their deaths at the hands of members of the dominant group.

As already said above, it is not only non-conformist characters who experience death. In most cases, they cause the death of those who endure their acts. Such is the case of Big Boy who kills Jim while wanting to violate his home; Mann kills Heartfield in an attempt to take away his stolen boat; Bigger kills Mary in an attempt to have sex with her while she is drunk and then kills Bessie whom he perceives as a burden. From a bird's eye point of view, most non-conformists are killed when their acts have resulted in the death of their victims, which evidences Wright's attempt to stay neutral when addressing the issue of dispossession and non-conformism. While Wright pictures with shocking images the circumstances under which non-conformists are killed, he does not lose sight of the fact that these killings are the results of their own acts. However, the deaths provoked by non-conformist acts are supposed to raise the dominant group's consciousness on the necessity to stop their actions if they want to live in a peaceful society. So far, the negative consequences of non-conformism on characters have been deeply explored. Notwithstanding the psychological, moral, physical suffering and subsequent violent deaths non-conformists are faced with, many of them still reach their basic objective before dying, namely the recovery of a sense of self and humanism.

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<sup>192</sup> Booker T. Washington's ideology of African American emancipation was based on the construction of a strong African American business. Washington believed that the only way African Americans could gain emancipation was to build their own business and to achieve that goal, vocational education was presented as the panacea. Once African Americans attended vocational schools, they would acquire technical and professional skills that would permit them to become economically independent vis-à-vis Whites. And "Once African Americans had proven their ability to help themselves and to acquire wealth and respectability, it was believed that prejudice and discrimination would disappear" (Johnson, Watson 66). Washington's ideology falls under the self-help category of African American emancipatory ideologies. Richard, in *Black Boy*, believes in this ideology as he refuses to be fed by benefactors and is determined to learn a professional job in the optical shop. For more on Washington's ideology, see Johnson and Watson's "W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington Debate: Effects upon African American Roles in Engineering and Engineering Technology" (2004).

## **CHAPTER IX: REPOSSESSING THE SENSE OF SELF AND HUMANISM**

Writing is a powerful tool against dispossession and to express non-conformism. Writing also allowed Wright to move from deprivation to the repossession of some sense of self and humanism. Because Blacks were sidelined by the dominant group in America, there were no better weapons than literature to fight for recognition. To achieve that goal, Wright did not take shortcuts as he chose one of the most difficult ways with literary non-conformism. To understand how he succeeded in reaching recognition and in recovering humanism, this section firstly takes a look into his writing style and techniques. More specifically, it analyzes literary techniques which allowed him to move from the margin of the American literary canon to the center, a characteristic of “minor literature” as conceptualized by Deleuze. When those who are submitted to dispossession decide to write and succeed in being part of the canon, their whole subjectivity is recognized, which enables them to work toward their full social, economic, cultural and political integration into mainstream society. In other words, writing enables those who are oppressed not only to be recognized but also to recover their freedom of being and acting. That is where Wright’s writing led him to. In this respect, this section will scan through the corpus to decipher how Wright mirrors the freedom of being and acting in his novels, which offers his protagonists the opportunity to move from alienation to self-direction. Once individuals guide themselves, they can reach full subjectivity as they become the sole masters of their acts.

However, it would be incomplete to look into this movement from alienation to self-directedness without considering the specific strategies Wright’s characters implement. They use non-conformism to resist prevailing norms and to adapt their own norms to build their subjectivity. The trickster figure, which consists in perverting the norms in disguised manners to better reform or change them, is one of the most important non-conformist ploys used in the three novels. In order to reveal the importance of such a strategy, this section will eventually highlight the development of the trickster figure and the extent to which it enables Wright’s protagonists to play with marginalization and objectification to repossess their black selves.

## 1. Writing from the Margin to Gain Recognition

To get his head out of the water, Wright adopted literary non-conformism. Like his senior literary brother Langston Hughes, Wright's writing from the margin offered him recognition by making him part of the American literary canon.

In "What is a Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari define minor literature as "not the literature of minor language, but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1986, 16). "In the minor literature, all matters are political and the question of the individual becomes even more necessary and indispensable" (17). Major literature is a connected whole which is made of traditional norms writers are supposed to follow. In other words, major literature is well territorialized by its common language use, themes, structure, content, which sometimes prevent minority or marginalized groups from expressing their individual particularities. However, through minor literature, the individual can de-territorialize the norms of major literature to create a new form of literature through lines of flight. By re-territorializing the norms through their writings and works, writers finally gain recognition and are accepted by the canon. Such is the example of Wright who, by escaping literary norms and creating his own, succeeded in creating a language within the language. Wright de-territorializes the encoded and standardized system so as to re-territorialize it by remodeling and adjusting it, which is characteristic of minor literature<sup>193</sup>. That is why language is highly significant in Wright's three works as the reader can understand it by simply looking into their respective titles.

*Uncle Tom's Children* reflects Wright's rejection of Stowe's stereotypes illustrated by Uncle Tom. Wright considered he was a direct descendant of Stowe's Uncle Tom, a major stereotype created by a white woman. Wright's texts are replete with Uncle Tom's children. As in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they are named "children", "boy", or "son" not only to underline the "infantilization" slavery and white stereotypes (reinforced by Stowe) caused but also to thwart the determinism of stereotypical taxonomy to gain full acceptance as American citizens. Similarly, the title *Native Son* sufficiently illustrates the wrightean quest for social recognition. *Native Son* alludes to "Native Americans" as if to suggest that, the black people of Wright's generation were born in America and could, therefore, be considered as natives. That is why, just like Wright, Bigger Thomas fights to elbow his way into American society. The title *Black*

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<sup>193</sup> For more on minor literature, see Christine Dualé's article entitled "Mode Mineur, Mode Majeur" where she explains this concept by applying it to Langston Hughes's writing and poetic creations. I also apply it to Richard Wright and the three novels I am studying here as this Deleuzian concept is also adapted to Wright.

*Boy* which is no less significant in terms of protest and recognition. Wright could have used the title “American Boy,” but he chose *Black Boy*. The adjective “black” appeals to racial pride and the place Blacks had to claim in American society according to Wright. So said, *Black Boy* appeals to national and collective awareness on the necessity to stop inaction and to take concrete actions for the recognition of the Black subject in American society.

Because the collective or national consciousness is often inactive in external life and always in the process of disintegration, it is minor literature that produces active solidarity, in spite of skepticism and, if the writer lives in the margin, is set apart from his fragile community, this situation makes him all the more able to express another, potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility ( Deleuze, Guattari, 1986, 17). That is exactly the case with Wright who, as he wrote from the margin, was set apart in his early career by Whites and criticized by his own community. Baldwin, for instance, blamed him for promoting “cultural separatism” to the detriment of “cultural plurality”<sup>194</sup> (Baldwin 485). Nevertheless, Wright did not divert from his chosen path and pursued his revolutionary becoming.

Revolutionary becoming as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari in “A Thousand Plateaus” refers to “a collective assemblage of enunciation within machinic assemblage and connection and heterogeneities in a rhizomatic system” (Deleuze, Guattari, 1987, 6). This assemblage does not signify a total break away from what already exists, but rather a multiplicity in which the old order ramifies or de-territorializes itself to connect with a new order which itself is in perpetual change, connecting to other orders (like a rhizome) through lines of flight. *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* epitomize this revolutionary becoming. In *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Wright connects heterogeneities by reverting to the spoken language so as to de-territorialize linguistic norms through lines of flight. In her article entitled “Glissement du mode majeur au mode mineur dans *The Best of Simple* de Langston Hughes,” Christine Dualé clarifies this practice which is typical of minor writing and of Langston Hughes in his stories of *Simple*:

In the original language, in addition to the comic effect, these exchanges reveal Hughes’ desire to maintain his character in a spoken language so as to give *Simple* all its authenticity and to create a language in the language, a practice which is ultimately

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<sup>194</sup> James Baldwin’s harsh criticism of Wright lies in the abysmal difference between his conception of black identity and that of Wright. It is true that the two writers were carrying out the same struggle, namely the emancipation of Blacks, but had diametrically opposed views on how to achieve it. While Wright described the living conditions of Blacks in a precise and pragmatic way, Baldwin saw it as a way of reinforcing racist stereotypes against Blacks, rather than promoting their cultural identity. For Baldwin, if Blacks were portrayed as criminals like Bigger in *Native Son*, Whites were comforted in their thoughts that Blacks truly fitted that description, which extended Whites’ prejudices about Blacks.

specific to “minor literature.” Hughes, through his creative process, breaks free from the norm by proposing another style, another writing. By discarding literary canons and adapting them, Hughes pursues a work of de-territorialization of a coded and standardized system to re-territorialize it, since it remodels and adapts it. [...] Also, in this work of linguistic creation, the grammatical and syntactic irregularities, relayed by typical pronunciation effects, allow the author to move away from Standard English which adds to the caricatural effect created and desired by Hughes<sup>195</sup>. (Dualé, 2016, 6)

In the same way, language in Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* is that of Blacks’ vernacular to give a voice to the black minority, as this exchange shows:

“Naw buddy naw! “said Big Boy, slapping the air with a scornful palm.  
“Aa, c mon! Don be a heel!”  
“N git lynched? Hell naw!”  
“He ain gonna see us.”  
“How yuh know?”  
“Cause he ain.”  
“Yuh-all go on. Ahma stay right here, said Big Boy.  
“Hell, let im stay! C mon, les go,” said Buck. (*UTC*, 20)

As one can see, the readers could fall into what Dualé calls “the trap of condescension” (Dualé, 2016, 13) as stereotypes can lead them to consider Blacks as uneducated and incapable of expressing themselves correctly in English, in other words, of being unable to use the language of the dominant properly. Yet Wright’s goal is first to deliberately ignore possible stereotypes in order to de-territorialize Standard English and turn Blacks’ vernacular into an authentic code that is only decodable by black insiders. In doing so, Wright expressed his refusal to conform to the accepted literary and cultural norms and proposed his own norm which he created within the major one in order to gain recognition as an original entity in its own right. Although Wright drew from Hughes’ vernacular writing, his writing style can be traced back to Mark Twain’s work on the vernacular, especially in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) with the portrayal of the fugitive slave character, Jim. The mention of Twain’s work on the vernacular is essential while analyzing the works of all twentieth century American writers who embraced this writing style and Wright in particular. Twain was the first American writer to successfully transcribe in his fiction spoken dialects of the South such as the Missouri “Negro” dialect, the backwoods

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<sup>195</sup> « Dans la langue d’origine, outre l’effet comique, ces échanges révèlent la volonté de Hughes de maintenir son personnage dans l’oralité pour lui conférer toute son authenticité mais surtout pour créer une langue dans la langue, une pratique finalement propre à la « littérature mineure ». Hughes, par son processus de création langagière, s’affranchit de la norme en proposant une autre écriture. En sortant des canons littéraires et en les adaptant, Hughes poursuit un travail de déterritorialisation d’un système codé et normé pour le re-territorialiser puisqu’il le remodèle et l’adapte, caractéristiques propres à la « littérature « mineure ». [...] Aussi, dans ce travail de création langagière, les irrégularités grammaticales et syntaxiques, relayées par des effets typiques de prononciation, permettent à l’auteur de s’éloigner de l’anglais standard et ajoutent à l’effet caricatural créé et voulu par Hughes pour faire sourire tous ses lecteurs, blancs et noirs confondus. »



Southern dialect, the Pike County dialect, to quote but a few. Some prestigious analysts such as Ernest Hemingway even considered that the roots of the whole American literary production were to be found in Twain's work. Wright's use of Black American vernacular English in his *Uncle Tom's Children* is a clear tribute to Twain's vernacular.

Wright went beyond the de-territorializing conception of writing to educate the younger generation of New York and Chicago to follow in his footsteps. To do so, he advised black writers to stop imitating white culture in their writing to turn to black ghetto popular culture by valuing orality, and Black American tradition. In a way, it can be argued that Wright advocated for black nationalism assumed with pride by Blacks. One of the concrete means that black artists had to use to achieve black nationalism was to break free from the chains of elitist rules imposed by the black bourgeoisie and Whites to adopt an artistic and literary discipline based on rules drawn from their own folklore. To set an example, Wright began with himself by linking his writing to Black American popular culture and bringing it to the service of the dispossessed people. He thus demonstrated all his desire not to let himself be possessed by his political, intellectual and literary environment dominated by Whites and the black bourgeoisie. This attitude can be glimpsed precisely not only in *Uncle Tom's Children* but also in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, even if his use of orality remains less pronounced in these novels than in *Uncle Tom's Children*. In *Black Boy*, even if Wright doesn't value orality very much in the narrative, he does from time to time bring in songs from the black folklore as if to show that he does not lose sight of the importance of orality in his writing. This can be seen in *Native Son* where these songs are recurring:

*Life is like a mountain railroad  
With an engineer that is brave  
We must make the run successful  
From the cradle to the grave. (NS, 21)*

These types of songs are reminiscent of those sung by slaves on plantations to keep their spirits high and hope for a better future, and sure enough, Bigger's mother sings this afore-mentioned song while she is thoughtful and cooks behind a curtain which symbolizes the margin. She enjoys singing a song of comfort when she thinks about the vicissitudes of life. Oral songs can also be read on some pages of *Black Boy*:

*Or we would form a long line and weave back and forth of the door, singing:  
Jew, Jew  
Two for Five  
That's what keeps*

*Jew alive.*  
Or we would chant:  
*Bloody Christ killers*  
*Never trust a Jew*  
*Bloody Christ killers*  
*What won't a Jew do?*  
*And all these white folks dressed so fine*  
*Their ass-holes smell just like me... (BB, 70, 204)*

In this excerpt, Wright uses italics to show the change in tone that must occur in the reading, a technique that allows orality to be invited into the text in order to enhance it. Wright uses orality to expose the stereotypical foundations of racial tensions and the fact that it is transmitted to people from birth in the family institution. This process is a way to describe the real life of black people in Harlem while bringing black culture and identity to the fore as Hughes already did so brilliantly. Hughes was convinced that, “Harlem is inseparable from his writing. [...] To him, the culture and experience of common people is a material that black artists have to use”<sup>196</sup> (Dualé, 2017, 204), and this is the same for Wright. As he clarifies, Blacks do not sing these hate songs because the Jews exploited them but for the simple reason that they “were taught at home and in Sunday School that Jews were Christ killers” (BB, 204), which shows how a racial entity or community can inherit stereotypes from their parents. This is the case for the Blacks who are still treated as slaves even though they never knew slavery. This is also the case for the Jews who are badly viewed as Christ killers even though they did not know the days of Jesus Christ. In short, racial stereotypes are transmitted and perpetuated from generation to generation and Wright makes use of a song to show it, which at the same time gives credit to orality in his early writing.

In *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, however, Wright shifts perspective and takes a clear position:

I had written a book of short stories which was published under the title of *Uncle Tom's Children*. When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest. (NS, 354)

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<sup>196</sup> « Harlem est tout aussi indissociable. [...] Pour lui, la culture et l'expérience des gens du peuple sont un matériau que les artistes noirs doivent utiliser. »

Wright de-territorializes himself from the vernacular language of *Uncle Tom's Children* to connect to the standard language. Nevertheless, there remains in *Black Boy* a certain temptation to invite oral discourse in a poetic style as can be seen in the following excerpt:

There was the drenching hospitality in the pervading smell of sweet magnolias.  
There was the drugged, sleepy feeling that came from sipping glasses of milk.  
There was the snow, fresh, saliva-stimulating smell cooking cotton seeds.  
There was puckery taste that almost made me cry when I ate my first half-ripe  
permission.  
There was the excitement of fishing in muddy country creeks with my grandpa on  
cloudy days. (*BB*, 54)

This prose chunk, where protagonist Richard describes his physical environment, appears as a poem which suggests the reader should pay attention to the rhythm or the rhyme in his/her reading. In this respect, Wright makes use of alliterations to give poetic features to his narrative. The use of "There was" here is a technique used to give more rhyme and more resonance to the tone of the prose much like a poem, which reminds us of the importance of orality in Wright's narratives.

In *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, the characters speak in an acceptable English, which shows that Wright's writing is not set in stone but branches out depending on the intended purpose. The language used in these two novels is a collective assemblage or a connection of "multiplicities" as Deleuze and Guattari put it, ranging from a "Proustian lucid, subtle and magic realism" (*AH*, 145), a Dreiserian coherent naturalism (Ward and Butler 310) to a Menckonian "straightforward, clear, clean, and sweeping" language style (*BB*, 271), which maintains revolutionary becoming.

Revolutionary becoming can also be seen through the behavior of protagonists like Bigger Thomas and Richard. Bigger leaves his territory from the margins to go and challenge the racial territorial limits by raping a white girl. Richard also crosses the margins of social rules to speak out against the stifling principles of his own family and society in general and, therefore, finds himself in an individual-versus-collective situation. This situation was true to Wright's own life and was even exacerbated after his encounter with Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism which advocates for the de-territorialization of the individual from all the constraints of the community and divine authority in order to re-territorialize himself according to his own convictions. Wright's writing from the margin, although controversial in the beginning, ended up gaining him recognition in the American literary sphere.

Wright was one of the first Blacks to break literary taboos by writing from the margin and thus to draw the attention of the American literary canon to his literary model, namely

protest writing. Initially marginalized during his first sketches in short story writing, he finally compelled American literary critics to get interested in his works thanks to his originality and tenacity in depicting Blacks' experience in American society. Wright's entrance was triumphant in the narrow circle of Black American writers of the margin when he published *Native Son* which raised literary debates at that time, some lambasting it as a stereotypical narrative (that was the case of Baldwin), others praising the honesty and pragmatism that the narrative displayed. Even though Baldwin, who was one of the dreadful critics of Wright's *Native Son*, humbly recognized Wright's influence on him:

I had identified myself with him long before we met: in a sense by no means metaphysical, his example had helped me to survive. He was black, he was young, he had come out of Mississippi and the Chicago slums, and he was a writer. He proved it could be done, proved it to me, and gave me an arm against all the others who assured me it could not be done. And I think I had expected Richard, on the day we met, somehow, miraculously, to understand this, and to rejoice in it. Perhaps that sounds foolish, but I cannot honestly say, not even now, that I really think it is foolish. Richard Wright had a tremendous effect on countless number of people whom he never met, multitudes whom he will now never meet. (Baldwin in Moskowitz, 2008).

Like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* who has to accomplish a controversial deed (by killing his boss's daughter) so as to gain recognition in his social milieu, the publication of this controversial novel gained Wright the attention of North-American readership. Few black novelists could create so much tension and social truth as Wright did through his minor writing. Yet, it is precisely the ability to create this permanent tension and social truth in his works that gained him recognition among his readers and peers. As Irving Howe argues,

The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture. (Howe 354-355)

Howe implies that since the publication of *Native Son*, no-one could ever ignore Wright's merits in American literary milieu since he stood as the pioneer of realistic and pragmatic Black American literature. This consists in putting an end to past lies by exposing the true experience of marginalized and persecuted Blacks like Bigger in *Native Son*. In brilliantly addressing the burning issue of race relations in the United States, Wright's works such as *Native Son* and *Black Boy* still sound up today as prophetic narratives with regard to the current American social reality marked by the sporadic resurgence of racial tensions and social inequalities which exacerbate urban criminality.

Wright's intellectual talents enabled him to be integrated into the Federal Writers Project before the Communist Party asked for his services at the *Daily Worker*. When he worked at the *Daily Worker*, Wright's early fiction was recognized and prized. That was the case of his short story "Fire and Cloud" which received the Story Magazine's first prize. The whole collection *Uncle Tom's Children* gained national attention right from its publication, because it was a daring promotion of communist ideals at a time when communists were hunted down in the United States. The selling of *Uncle Tom's Children* and Wright's new position at the *New Masses* earned him a sound financial health which enabled him to travel and settle in New York (Kinnamon, Fabre ix).

Wright reached the top of his game in New York when he published *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. He received the prestigious Spingarn Medal of the NAACP for his political and literary commitment. Clearly, the literary success that Wright benefited from testifies the recognition of his writing in American readership and beyond. In the same vein, Milton Moskowitz summarizes his literary success with *Native Son* and *Black Boy* in terms of their record-breaking number of copies sold, translations and adaptations:

Richard Wright's influence on American literature was profound. *Native Son* was a commercial as well as a critical success. It sold 315,000 copies in the first three months after publication, was a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, was translated into French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Czech, and was adapted for the theater and motion pictures. *Black Boy*, similarly, rang cash registers. It sold 195,000 copies through Harper and another 351,000 through the Book-of-the-Month Club, making it the fourth largest selling non-fiction title of 1945. Wright was the first African-American writer to reach such a wide audience. (Moskowitz, 2008)

In late 1950s, Wright became the leading figure of committed Black American literature and reached international fame to the point of being invited to the Bandung Conference. Nevertheless, it was not until the 1970s that Wright's works particularly drew the attention of prominent contemporary American literary critics and intellectuals who called for a renewed assessment of his works which went beyond literary matters to reach philosophical ones. To Paul Gilroy,

The depth of [Wright's] philosophical interests has been either overlooked or misconceived by the almost exclusively literary inquiries that have dominated analysis of his writing. His most significant contribution, however, was his desire to accurately portray blacks to white readers, thereby destroying the white myth of the patient, humorous, subservient black man. (Gilroy 147)

Professor Dan McCall, in *The Example of Richard Wright*, goes further to consider Wright as the father of contemporary Black American literature:

Wright is the father of the contemporary black writer because when we come to Wright's best work we are faced with the central question about being black in America. Richard Wright was the first man to put it to us with all its naked power [...] the farther we get from Richard Wright and his modes of thought, the better we can see the extent of the debt we owe him. [...] However outmoded some of his weapons may seem now, Richard Wright was the man who first conquered the big ground. [...] The achievement of Richard Wright came from his determined ability to explore his own individual suffering and create from it crucial examples of what 'all the long centuries' mean. (McCall in Moskowitz, 2008)

While Gilroy calls for a renewed consideration of Wright and his writing to dig out his philosophical worth, his call has certainly been heard as other intellectuals got particularly interested in Wright and became what could be called Wright scholars. That said, no less than five scholars have exclusively written about Wright's personal life and literary career. The first publication was *Richard Wright* (1968) by Constance Webb. The second one was *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (1973) by Michel Fabre who helped include Wright's works in African American literary studies at the Sorbonne University as they were close friends. It is worth insisting that Fabre particularly contributed to Wright's literary recognition in France in general and at the Sorbonne University in particular where the study of Wright's works was made mandatory in the 1970s. The third one was *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* (1980) by Addison Gayle, a former professor of English at City University of New York. The fourth biography was *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (1988) by Margaret Walker, one of Wright's friends. The fifth and more recent one is *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (2000) by Hazel Rowley, an Australian writer. All these biographies on Wright are his legacy.

Wright has left a great legacy to black literary posterity through his particular way of approaching literature. While most black writers of his time wrote to meet the expectations of white but also black readers, in other words to please both readers, Wright took another path by deciding to uncompromisingly describe what he could see as the intrinsic reality of Black American life. This approach, although controversial, eventually helped him gain recognition and even influenced the next generation of Black American writers such as Amiri Baraka for whom "Wright was one of the people who made [him] conscious of the need to struggle" (Baraka in Independent Television Service, 2008). Baraka, along with female writers, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, drew inspiration from Wright's rebellion to position themselves in the literary world by creating their own art in defiance of critics and without seeking to justify

their choices. Even more ironically, Wright also allowed those who disagreed with him, such as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, to rely on his writing (which they perceived as stereotypical) to write more positively about black lives. In short, whether they are against or in favor of Wright, it would be fair to say that many writers have used Wrightean art to create their own art and style, as Philip Quarles explains at length:

Richard Wright changed the landscape of possibility for African-American writers. Wright's defiance, his refusal to give the reading public what it had hitherto demanded of the African-American writer, his insistence on the expression of an African-American voice, allowed later writers to do the same, allowed Toni Morrison, for example, to write as she would, without concern for explaining her sometimes obscure meanings (e.g., her references to news events from long ago or words or phrases from African-American vernacular speech) to a mainstream reading public. For other African-American writers, positioning themselves against Wright allowed them to write about African-American culture in a more positive way, to assume a posture not requiring that the subject of the fiction, the African-American, be seen as victim. (Quarles, 2013)

Regarding its significant critical reception, Wright's works have been adapted for cinema and music theaters, not to mention the various awards he has received, which provides further evidence of his recognition in literature in particular and art in general.

In the area of cinema, *Native Son* has been adapted by several filmmakers. We can cite among others the adaptations of Pierre Chenal in 1951, of Jerrold Freedman in 1986 and more recently that of Rashid Johnson in 2019. The last adaptation of *Native Son* is surely not fortuitous. Indeed, it can be noticed in recent years that the old demons of racial tensions are resurfacing in the United States. The hope that the election of the first Black American president would mark the era as a post-racial one seems to have become an illusion with regard to the outburst of racial hatred that has occurred after his presidency. This has given birth to the Black Lives Matter movement created on July 13, 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, accused of the murder of a black teenager Trayvon Martin. The movement aims to denounce modern racism and police violence directed mostly against black citizens while Donald Trump cancelled anti-racism trainings that he considered as anti-American propaganda. On June 17, 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina, a white man called Dylan Roof carried out a massacre in a black church where nine churchgoers perished. This act was seen as the response of a white supremacist to the activities of Black Lives Matter. Tensions escalated on July 7, 2016 with the murder of five white police officers in Dallas by a black man named Xavier Johnson. All these events are strangely reminiscent of the racial tensions that Wright describes in *Native Son*, hence the need felt by Rashid Johnson to re-adapt them into film to sensitize the

American society against the persistence of racial tensions in the United States which have lingered for more than a century. The recent racially-motivated violence and Johnson's film update *Native Son* reminds us that interracial peace still cannot be taken for granted in the United States and that tougher policies against racism should continue to be adopted.

Therefore, Wright's influence on African American literature is no longer to be demonstrated. Beyond literature, it is the whole African American culture which has been influenced by Wright's works in general and by *Native Son* in particular. Such an influence is so striking that some critics seem to get carried away by his early works. Such is the case of Irving Howe for whom,

The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama, and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture. (Howe in Moskowitz, 2008)

As can be understood, Howe shows that beyond the very culture of African Americans, it is American culture that was and is influenced by *Native Son*, which permits to safely suggest Wright's works find a larger audience in the black community in particular and Americans in general. McCall (1969) goes further when he considers Wright as the father of contemporary African American literature and claims his recognition:

Wright is the father of the contemporary black writer because when we come to Wright's best work we are faced with the central question about being black in America. Richard Wright was the first man to put it to us with all its naked power...the farther we get from Richard Wright and his modes of thought, the better we can see the extent of the debt we owe him...However outmoded some of his weapons may seem now, Richard Wright was the man who first conquered the big ground. [...] The achievement of Richard Wright came from his determined ability to explore his own individual suffering and create from it crucial examples of what "all the long centuries" mean. (McCall in Moskowitz, 2008)

Clearly speaking, McCall implies that Wright can no longer be seen as any artist in American literature. In succeeding to trigger white and black readers' and critics' attentions, Wright's status has changed forever. He has moved from the margin to the center and became, therefore, part of the American literary canon. And because Wright elbowed his way into the American literary canon previously dominated by Whites, his influence extended beyond American cultural and literary borders to inspire other artists in different literary horizons. This is, for instance, the case of the black diaspora in Europe with Alioune Diop, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Cedar Senghor. Wright's recognition among these black French intellectuals was so great that Fabre pictured him as the representative of the English-speaking diaspora in France.



Wright, Fabre claims, “played a part not only in the exchange of views that preceded the writing of the editorial arguing for cultural orientation and ideological freedom, but also as a representative of the English speaking members of the black diaspora (Fabre, 1985, 193).

In the field of theater, one can distinguish the adaptation of *Native Son* by Orson Welles and Canada Lee in Broadway in 1941, that of Kent Gash for Intiman Theater in Seattle, Washington in 2006, and that of Nami E. Kelley at Court Theater in Chicago in 2014 (Bucker 1987; Jones 2014). Orson Wells’ adaptation received quite a wide coverage in the press at the time, which confirmed Wright’s recognition, acceptance, and fame and led him from dispossession to possession.

Like *Native Son*, *Black Boy* was a resounding success, not only for the controversy it raised in American society but also for its recognition in the literary sphere. In February 1945, *Black Boy* sent 195,000 retail copies in its first edition and 351,000 copies through the Book-of-the-Month Club and is in the Book-of-the-Month-Club selection which ranked it among the fifty outstanding books of 1945 (*Literary Classics of the US* 407-408). In the field of theater, *Black Boy* was readapted in France by Jérôme Imard in April 2017 at the Théâtre Mantois, with a white actor playing the role of Richard (Imard in *Courier Picard*, 2019). Although not black, the role was beautifully embodied as if to demonstrate that the message *Black Boy* conveys is universal. *Black Boy* has also been the object of theatrical adaptation in the United States by Wynn Handman since 2005 (WSU Performing Arts, 2016). The issues Wright raised in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* continue to resonate in American society where racial inequalities are still lingering on and we are made to understand it through Capers remark:

The issues that *Native Son* introduced about race, poverty and crime are still extant today. Nearly one in four blacks live below the poverty line, a figure which approximately doubles that of whites. Moreover, while there has been discussion about the sharp decline of crime across the country since its peak in the early 1990s, the fact remains that the number of black males in the criminal justice system is still disproportionately high [...]. Black males today have a one in three chance of going to prison during their lifetime, as opposed to a one in seventeen chance for white males. (Capers 103)

In the field of cinema, *Black Boy* has been readapted in the United States by Madison D. Lacy in September 1994, a film which traces the life, work and legacy of Wright from Mississippi, passing through Chicago to New York (Street, 2020). Wright’s literary recognition is also reflected in the awards he won. Over the years, he won the Story Magazine Award in 1938, the Geggenheim Fellowship in 1939, and the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP in 1941 (World Almanac Education Group, 2008). Posthumously in 2010, Wright was inducted into the

Chicago Literary Hall of Fame. He was also celebrated with a medallion unveiling in 2010 at 175 Carlton Avenue in Fort Greene, Brooklyn (Literary Hall of Fame, 2010).

Just as Fabre's landmark biographical work on Wright is entitled *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, Wright's quest for social, cultural and economic possession for himself and for the whole black community remained unfinished as he was compelled to leave his home country and precociously died in France in 1960 from a heart attack. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that his writing brought him success and allowed him to move from marginalization to recognition. In other words, writing enabled him to move from dispossession to repossession, from lost identity to recognized identity and from alienation to self-direction. Writing led him to the recovery of his personal self and that of his community.

## **2. The Recovery of the Self-Directed Being**

Self-directedness can be understood as a personality trait which enables the individual to adapt or adjust and face any situation triggered by social, economic, spiritual or political forces so as to reach an objective or value which has been personally chosen. The self-directed individual is willful, free in movement and behaves as a completely integrated individual as opposed to a disorganized and influenced individual<sup>197</sup> (Cloniger, Svrakic, Przybeck, 1993). However, this status cannot be achieved without a soul which makes and defines itself individually without the influence of the visible world. Since the visible world always influences the establishment of the free soul, the only way to shed this worldly influence to reach a free soul is to embrace non-conformism when confronted to the injunctions of the visible world. By violating the injunctions of the visible world, most of Wright's non-conformist characters manage to express their quest for an authentic soul free from spiritual dispossession. By choosing the path of non-conformism, they experience significant results in terms of combating the harmful forces of the visible world such as corruption, dispossession and alienation of any forms. In achieving these results, the souls of Wright's characters take their liberty from visible attractive forces and degradation or disappearance and move towards the attainment of a self-directed being. In other words, they move from dispossession to

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<sup>197</sup> Pursuant to Cloniger, Svrakic and Przybeck's study of self-directedness, De Fruyt, De Wiele and Heeringen speak of "control locus". The more the individual has internal control locus, the more he embodies all the real characteristics of the self-directed individual. Self-determination is also said to be of paramount importance in the actions of the self-directed individual. For other details on self-directedness, see De Fruyt, De Wiele and Heeringen's "Le modèle psychologique du tempérament et du caractère de Cloniger et le modèle à cinq facteurs de la personnalité" (2000).

possession and finally, repossession. This reality features Wright's real life as Howland explains it at length. In analyzing Wright's quest for self-directed being, Howland shows the importance of Wright's soul and all the ups and downs he went through to reach freedom in his soul and flesh:

All souls confront corrupting and enslaving forces in the human world, and Wright's extreme experiences vividly display what sources of strength are needed to protect one's own powers and special gifts, and one's humanity in general, from dissipation and degeneration [...]. The book [*Black Boy*] is most fundamentally about the development of Wright's soul, and of the great passion which moves it, a passion which seems to respond to some powerful and sustaining source of alienation. (Howland 117)

It can be seen from Howland's analysis that Wright's work in general deals with the question of soul-making which is a process by which the individual finds himself in a bitter struggle to regain his freedom of movement in the spiritual as in the physical world. Wright could not win this fight by blindly conforming to the human forces which threatened to dissipate or degenerate his individual talents, or simply his humanity. Thanks to his passion and determination, Wright recovered a free soul that dictated his own thoughts in a way that allowed him to lead himself in society just like some of his characters in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.

Bigger in *Native Son* only regains his freedom of thought and movement after committing his murder against Mary. Whereas he was tense and felt his social environment dictated what to do next, Bigger's crime frees his soul and he becomes capable of making his own courageous decisions like staying in the crime scene to further manipulate his persecutors and addressing Jan and Max as his equals while he previously perceived them as a force controlling his moral and spiritual life. In the same vein, Tuitt demonstrates that Bigger is fully satisfied after his murder because he has succeeded in creating a world of himself (Tuitt 212), a world over which he has got full control and moves around according to his own desires. The world that Bigger creates for himself, according to Tuitt, is one in which he has become the rational, objective actor of the law which embodies violence. And since the law itself promotes violence against the dispossessed, one of the ways to reach subjectivity or individualism is to take life away. And of course, Bigger takes two lives away, namely Mary's and Bessie's. Mary Dalton's death particularly creates for Bigger an "identity within the universal notion of humanity" and he gains "recognition under the law, on terms of the law as it presents itself to Bigger as all-consuming, threatening white blur. Mary's death becomes, for Bigger, "a creation, the one supreme, meaningful act of life" (Tuit 212). Also, several characters in *Uncle Tom's Children* such as Silas, Sue, and Mann experience spiritual revolution just before dying. Like a soul freed from oppression and ready to enter the world of self-directed beings, one can

understand the soul's satisfaction that Wright lets the reader glimpse at Sue's attitude before her death at the hands of her tormentors:

'Yuh didn't git whut yuh wanted: Ah come here by mashef.' [...] She felt rain falling into her wide-open, dimming eyes and heard faint voices. Her lips moved soundlessly. Yuh didn't git yuh didn't yuh didn't [...]. Focused and pointed she was, buried in the depths of her star, swallowed in its peace and strength: and not feeling her flesh growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never dies. (*UTC*, 213-215)

This description of Sue's end of life demonstrates the spiritual redemption she experiences. Despite the pain, she is satisfied that her tormentors have failed to make her denounce her accomplices thanks to her new status as a self-directed individual who does not submit to anyone. Wright even evokes a whole lexical field of spiritual peace such as "focus," "white star," "freshness," "peace" and "strength" as if to insist on the fact that Sue dies physically, of course, but remains a self-directed soul spiritually free from any constraint as a result of her rebellion against the system of dispossession. And when the soul of the individual is free, it allows him/her to attain self-consciousness.

Regaining self-consciousness is also free from all external influences and, at the same time, contributes to the building of the self-directed being. From the moment the individual regains a free soul, he/she discovers his/her true identity. The lives of the dispossessed is marked by oppressive forces which prevent them from possessing anything including their conscience due to a whole ideology which challenges their thoughts and actions. By persevering in non-conformism, the dispossessed characters manage to reverse the trend and challenge the dispossessing ideology in order to forge a free and autonomous conscience.

*Black Boy*, in a sense, allows his main character Richard to free himself from the chains of dispossession and determine himself in relation to his social environment just as exactly explained by Wilhite:

By disrupting the reproduction of oppressive relations, the narrator [...] creates a sense of authentic consciousness, [...] halts the interpellative process of ideological apparatuses that attempt to ensnare him, and interpellates a new kind of subject: the fully conscious, autonomous individual. (Wilhite 105)

We could speak of a self-directed individual who is, henceforth, conscious of his/her actions and shoulders consequences with serenity. That is the case with Bigger who feels confident after dispossessing Mr. Dalton of his daughter and Richard who is capable of withstanding the reactive forces that his behavior entails (Howland 101, 123). As the narrative reveals, Bigger's

sense of being, self-awareness, self-worth and self-direction appear only after his non-conformist act:

He felt that he had his destiny in his grasp. He was more alive than he could ever remember having been; his mind and attention were pointed, focused toward a goal. For the first time in his life he moved consciously between two sharply defined poles. He was moving away from the threatening penalty of death, from the dead-like times that brought him that tightness and hotness in his chest; and he was moving toward that sense of fullness he had so often inadequately felt in magazines and movies. (NS, 129)

This passage really shows how self-directed Bigger becomes after killing Mary. He can freely move toward his destiny as a free individual and his self-worth and fullness are no longer inspired by movies and magazines but rather come true as part of his newly-acquired self-directed individuality. By the same token, Richard's newly found self-directed individuality in *Black Boy* can be seen in his victory over the principal and his delivering his own valedictorian speech instead of the principal's, which helps him consolidate his individuality. Smith contends that Richard's non-conformist behavior enables him to resist and stay free from his alienating social environment:

This struggle is the struggle of the rebel who refuses to acquiesce in the conspiracy of this black family community, a microcosm of the community at large, to force him to deny his individuality and is, therefore, alienated completely from anything but his own self-consciousness. (Smith 130)

From this point of view, anyone would agree with Wilhite that non-conformism reveals to Richard the possibility of a struggle against oppressive conditions and allows him to achieve the self-consciousness and individuality he has been yearning for (Wilhite 115-119).

Non-conformism allows some dispossessed characters to express their individualities before dire circumstances which are only social creations aimed at imprisoning them in destitution and in the permanent need for social assistance. When one suggests that conformism allows rebellious characters to emerge from dispossession to possession, it is not necessarily all about material or economic ownership. At the material and economic levels, non-conformism does not, for example, make Richard and Bigger different from the other characters because they share almost the same deprivations, the same social conditions and the same dispossessing environment. But psychologically, morally and emotionally speaking, non-conformist characters who have forged their self-directed being feel very privileged after their non-conformist acts. For example, after his murder, Bigger feels privileged compared to the other dispossessed members of his family since he personally finds a new meaningful life, an unprecedented security, serenity and sense of superiority which are highlighted in one *Native Son* extract:

The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and the world he feared. He had murdered and has created a new life for himself. It was something that was his own, and it was for the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him. Yes, he could sit here calmly and eat and not be concerned about what his family thought or did. He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them. His crime was an anchor weighing safely in time: it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and knife did not. He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them; they were incapable of thinking he had done such a deed. And he had done something which even he did not think was possible. (NS, 118-119)

Such a description of Bigger's mental state after his murder proves that he is now such a free being that he finds positive points in the murder of the dominant group's member despite all the risks of judicial lynching that his act foreshadows. One can also see the difference that Bigger as an individual maverick makes between himself and the other conformist members of his family. While he discovers his own worth and potential in action, the other members of his family remain locked in ignorance and guided by their oppressive environment. Wright himself lived like some of his dissident characters.

By embracing non-conformist writing through special and pragmatic language, Wright distinguished himself from other Black American writers by taking control of his self to guide it according to his own beliefs and perceptions. While others indulged in lamenting and self-devaluing in accordance with what the hostile environment imposed on them, Wright regained all of his self-confidence and had no complex in expressing his own value. He expressed it in *Black Boy* and used Richard as a mouthpiece:

Well, I had never felt my place, or rather, my deepest instincts had always made me reject to which the white South had assigned to me. It had never occurred to me that I was in any way an inferior being. And no word that I had ever heard fall from the lips of southern white men had ever really made me doubt the worth of my own humanity. (BB, 283)

These words bear witness to the new self-determination that Wright's non-conformism had given him. While Wright seems not to believe in the possibility of full liberation in *Native Son* when Bigger is eventually sentenced to death, in *Black Boy* he believes it is possible through non-conformist doings such as reading and writing (Makombe 294).

It could be paradoxical to say that reading and writing are non-conformist acts regarding the individual and collective self-awakening that they can entail. Yet in the context of Wright's fictional construction, reading and writing are supposed to be the prerogatives of the dominant class. Therefore, it is forbidden to those who have nothing to read and write or learn how to, lest they discover self-consciousness and self-directedness. Since Richard is a member of the

dominated group, his stubbornness in reading and writing can be considered as non-conformist because his action is conflicting with the established social norms. This social reality is mirrored in *Black Boy* as Richard can be seen wanting to read and write and is hindered by white librarians and even his own family members such as Granny who has internalized the idea that his reading and writing are not only conflicting with white social prescriptions but also with her Adventist faith. *Black Boy* traces the path to freedom and self-realization and Richard's flight to the North symbolizes for him as for Wright this quest for freedom, self-direction and self-consciousness which are achieved through his own imagination. Now that imagination is not conditioned by anyone else but his own self, everything becomes possible in Richard's words:

Anything seemed possible, likely, feasible because I wanted everything to be possible [...]. Because I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen within. Because my environment was bare and bleak, I endowed it with unlimited potentialities, redeemed for the sake of my own hungry and cloudy yearning. (*BB*, 81-83)

Here, too, it is arguably the self-directed Richard who speaks. While the real and objective world remains under the dominant group's control, Richard takes control over the imaginative world as a free soul and redeems his hunger for self-direction. And because Richard is self-directed, he takes power over his imaginary environment and directs it according to his own yearnings such as reaching full humanity or personhood, which all results from what could be called his ontological metamorphosis leading him on the path of full repossession.

As Thaddeus suggests, the arousal of the self-directed being is marked by the metamorphosis from a dispossessed self to a self-created one. Non-conformism enables the dispossessed individual,

[T]o reach a plateau, a moment of resolution which allows him to recollect emotion in tranquility. This feeling enables him to create a firm setting for his reliable self, to see this self in relief against society or history, [...] moving undeviatingly from self-denial to self-discovery. [...] Richard Wright's *Black Boy* experienced such a metamorphosis. (Thaddeus 199)

Characters like Richard and Bigger usually begin with shyness and act as typical average individuals until they summon enough courage to challenge the dispossessing social, economic and political environment through unconventional means such as bad language and stealing as Richard does in *Black Boy*, and murders as is the case for Bigger in *Native Son*.

It is undeniable that once those who are under dispossession discover their own selves and their full potentialities, they move from shy individuals to articulate ones, from motionless

individuals to moving ones, from pointless subjectivity to a meaningful one. In this respect, Thaddeus makes it clear that Wright's novels such as *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are "molded and sharply beginning in speechlessness and anger and ending in articulateness and hope" (200). And, indeed, Sue moves from a submissive religious woman to a fully committed communist in *Uncle Tom's Children*; Richard shifts from a naïve child to a self-conscious teenager in *Black Boy*, while Bigger goes from a naïve and shy boy to a bigger actor of social life in *Native Son*. As a general rule, the self-directed being who arouses from non-conformism reinserts the dispossessed subject in the social and societal frameworks.

In the social and societal frameworks, the self-directed individual is henceforth inscribed, he/she is able to propose another location and positioning. While the dispossessed are initially pushed to the margins and boundaries of social life, those who rebel and create a free self can then denounce the process of marginalization and boundaries set for them not to cross. The self-directed individual no longer abides by these traditional positioning. Rather, he/she contests the dominant group's territory and privileges such as working, reading and writing which Richard breaks into though they are considered to be the prerogatives of the dominant group. In *Black Boy*, Richard goes further than reading and embraces writing, a realm where he is able to freely tell his own stories as though to suggest that he has escaped from letting others tell his own story. Richard's breakthroughs in writing and reading correspond to Wright's real-life experience as he embraced autobiography which is one of the best literary tools to tell more exactly one's own story.

One can agree that autobiography in the United States was a purely white tradition, but Wright appropriated it as a means of resistance which enabled him to denounce the prevailing social plight and shape his subjectivity against a dispossessing environment. Ever since Wright elbowed his way out of the dispossessing social and political environment, he succeeded in positioning himself in a way to repossess his own linguistic and artistic place where he fought against dispossession. Demirtürk carries this idea further insisting on the role of Wright's autobiography in recovering the self-directed individual. In Demirtürk's perception of Wright's *Black Boy*, this autobiography enables the oppressed to situate their personal preferences within the larger social and political contexts and to offer an alternative discourse to resist stereotypes and misconceptions. He further contends that "Wright's representation of the black subject's formation reconstructs his social location [...], becomes a forceful site of resistance, as the black boy subverts the white authority by entering the social discourse he has never been admitted to" (Demirtürk 272). While entering the social discourse from which they have been excluded, they are moving from the margin to the center. This is mirrored in *Uncle Tom's*



*Children* where Big Boy and his comrades direct themselves from the town's margins and walk to the center by reaching Jim's private swimming pool. In *Native Son*, Bigger escapes from the grip of social neglect by directing himself into the center of public gaze thanks to his murder. In *Black Boy*, Richard resists domestic marginalization and places himself at the center of public attention thanks to his rebellious attitude towards racial separatism.

In refusing to abide by the principles of racial separatism, Richard finds himself in a middle position. He can perceive his own self as standing in the borderline of white and black culture (Maaloum 2-4). Wright himself experienced the same situation as he experienced a kind of cultural hybridity vastly characterized by fragmentation, heterogeneity and difference just as Maaloum suggested earlier. Wright fought hard to escape from the grip of black and white cultures, and this enabled him not to reject others simply because of their difference. His recovery of the self-directed individual led him to refuse to behave like black nationalists who also reject Whites as different, and in order to get his message across, he excelled in the manipulation of white language in a Sinclairian, Menckonian or Dreiserian style. In Wright's positioning as a hybrid being, it is proved that racial hegemony is not possible as supported by Derrida's fragmentation theory<sup>198</sup>. While Whites think they are dominating so-called inferior races by keeping them in their places, Bigger and Gus as free selves can still enter white domains by playing white, and make their knowledge about white ways a tool to manipulate them to their advantage without Whites discovering it:

Playing white, Bigger and Gus [...] create mobility and action which are denied to them by the condition of poverty and subjection in the black side of the town. Their performance enacted in terms of their resemblance to or difference from white people does not only grant them political access spheres of privilege and powers exclusive to Whites but also positions them as hybrid and in-between subjects who inhabit the borderline which is marked by racial mixing and contamination and against which whiteness and blackness define themselves as essentialist and pure modes of identification. (Maaloum 241)

As it is implied, the play enables Bigger and Gus to enter the white world through fantasy while keeping their black awareness. This is also a kind of hybridity which enables them to reject the domination of whiteness or blackness, which, in turn, is a form of de-territorialization of the stability of racial identity. In a few words, hybridity enables Blacks to manipulate white

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<sup>198</sup> Racism does not escape from Derrida's concept of fragmentation. Just as meaning in general is always fragmented and in a process of constant evolutions, so is the meaning of race and racial domination. One's perception of race is different from another's according to one's geographical and cultural origins, which suggests that race is a cultural construction and therefore cannot have a universal meaning. And because the meaning of race is not universal, race cannot be used as a reason for domination.

stereotypes and to achieve clandestine subjectivity. This is perceptible in Bigger after his murdering Mary Dalton.

While playing the shy and innocent boy, Bigger uses these white stereotypes to manipulate them as blind men according to his personal interests, as Maaloum states: “After killing Mary, he learns to vacate his place of subjection in the white order and liberate himself from the prison of his corporal invisibility by fooling whites, acting like they want and expect him to while using and manipulating their blindness to his advantage” (248). Acting like a body without organs, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s concept, Bigger succeeds in manipulating Whites who ignore he can act as a subject<sup>199</sup>. Killing Mary enables him to see society without being seen (256-257). In such circumstances, instead of being supervised, Bigger becomes the manipulator and supervisor of the Daltons’ family which becomes a site of freedom for the self-directed being he has become (262). From the moment Bigger is able to manipulate the Daltons’ family, one can, henceforth, recognize he has created his real self just like Richard who has already made precocious difference among his fellow young boys in terms of creating genuine self. “He created selfhood and exerted his will at the risk of annihilation” (Hakutani 74).

However, it should be noted that while Bigger uses murder to create his true self, Richard mostly uses language, that Jennifer Poulos terms “bad language”, to build his selfhood despite all the hellish pressure from the dispossessing environment. The bad language Poulos talks about is the language which does not conform to social, moral and cultural expectations. When Richard asks Granny to kiss his ass after she finishes washing him, he suffers a hard blow because this speech is not expected to come from the mouth of a young boy. In a few words, bad language is a language which is contrary to prevailing family or community values. Richard uses bad language to challenge some Black American community values such as violent home education which was an experience Wright himself went through when he was still a young boy. Despite his violent environment, Wright kept on his way to self-directedness and projected this stance through Richard in *Black Boy*:

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<sup>199</sup> The concept of “Body without Organs” (BwO) was developed by Deleuze all through his deconstructionist works. The body without organs has no tongue, no teeth, no larynx, no eye, no stomach, no anus etc. It is the individual who constructs the body and puts on the organs he wishes. Depriving the body of organs is not tantamount to killing it, but it is all about opening it to connections made of various agencies. When the body has no original organ, it permits the user of the body to add organs which act according to his objectives. For example, if I add a mouth, it will speak the words I put in it, which places me in control of the spoken speech. Bigger can be initially seen as a body without organs until he adds some that act according to his own will and permit him to get his full worth and give meaning to his life. For more details on the “body without organs, see Deleuze and Guattari’s “What is Minor Literature” (1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

The most painful stance he took in his struggle was to be an intense individualist. [...] In scene after scene, both the black and the white community kept piling crushing circumstances upon him, but no matter how unbearably they were pressed down on him, he refused to give in. Only under such pressure can one discover one's self". (Hakutani 74)

Wright, just like his characters in *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom's Children*, shared the same determination to keep their selfhood against all odds. No matter how different these characters' strategies are, one important thing which unifies them is the recovery of the self-directed being which endows all of them free movement.

Free movement is an important feature of the self-directed being, because no-one can be considered as a self-directed individual unless he can move freely around his environment. In Wright's three works, all the non-conformist characters move from placeless and motionless individuals to fast-moving ones, which confirms the recovery of the self-directed individual. Movement frees the self-directed individual from oppression and enables him to go to better places where he can operate in the realm of universal freedom of speech and actions. As Butler thinks, the freely moving individuals find in motion what is lost in space and, indeed, movement takes them "from a restricted past towards new possibilities" (Butler 7). This is evidenced in *Uncle Tom's Children* where Big Boy escapes from lynching thanks to his prompt movement toward Chicago and in *Black Boy* where Richard immediately finds a home, love and job just upon fleeing from Aunt Granny's dispossessing and oppressive family. Still in *Uncle Tom's Children*, movement enables Mann to escape from flooding and enables Reverend Taylor and his community to oblige local authorities to provide them with social aid. It is true that the dispossessed characters are not permitted to move since they are supposed to be placeless, but those who rebel and recover their freedom of movement quit boredom and idleness and pose meaningful actions. Butler even goes further suggesting that motion endows the life of self-directed individuals with "vitality and meaning, transforming a dead road of routine into a dynamic world of beauty where the self can be transformed" (9). There is no doubt that the scenes following Richard's escape from his oppressive family environment are much more indicative of his recovered freedom and vitality:

Here Wright is outdoors, moving in a world of imaginative, physical and emotional freedom. Whereas in the previous scene [the one in which Richard is collectively assaulted by his family members], his consciousness was blocked by fear, he now relaxes and expands his sensibilities [...]. Significantly, [the narrative] is suffused with lyrical images of indefinite motion: horses clopping down a dusty road; Richard himself running through wet garden paths in the early morning; the Mississippi river winding past the bluffs of Natchez; wild geese flying South for the winter; a solidarity ant

moving on 'a mysterious journey,' and 'vast hazes of gold' which 'washed eastward from star-heavy skies on silent nights.' (Butler 9)

Butler makes it clear that freedom of movement moves the self-directed individual out of stasis into open worlds of imagination and possibilities as symbolized by the lyrical images described in the narrative. As Butler further contends, "the implications of this startling juxtaposition" of lyrical images create a free self and "almost always generates emotional and spiritual freedom" (9) permitting to move from anonymity to visibility. Bigger experiences such an emotional and spiritual freedom and even a psychological transformation after killing. He is psychologically empowered even though he will face execution (Alzoubi 8), which implies that physical death cannot prevent emotional and spiritual freedom borne from irreversible self-directedness. As the narrative reveals Bigger's thoughts after his crime, "There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it" (NS, 94). Nevertheless, because self-directedness moves those whose subjectivity is oppressed out of oppression, diehard oppressors such as Bruden in *Uncle Tom's Children* and Pease in *Black Boy* make use of violence to counter them. In such circumstances, the protagonists develop the trickster figure to achieve subjectivity without being caught and punished.

### **3. The Fight for Repossession through the Trickster Figure**

In almost every culture around the world, a story about a mythical being endowed with various powers and strategies exist. These powers permit him to act differently, challenge supernatural powers, shake prevailing conventions and bring about new social realities. The basic objective is to fight against the wrongs of society (usually through unconventional behavior) so that everybody can live a peaceful spiritual and physical life. Usually referred to as the trickster figure, it takes on various forms (human and animal) and names according to each culture's mythology. For example, Hermes or Prometheus in classical Greece, it becomes Loki in Norse mythology, Eshu in Yoruba religion, Juha in Turkey, John in Black American tradition (Ben-Amos 576). As for the animal form, it is a coyote in Native American mythology, a fox in India, a spider, a rabbit, a tortoise or a hyena in African cultures, to quote but a few (Ben-Amos 576). The trickster figure has been re-appropriated in literature, a specific character who acts unconventionally with a view to bringing social change. This can be perceived through Wright's works of art.

The trickster is an important figure in the culture of his environment and in African American culture in general. Through his deeds and gestures, the trickster figure penetrates the prevailing culture and brings about some kind of cultural transformation as a cultural hero. While culture is dominated by the major social group, the trickster figure plays a role as a cultural deconstructionist and provokes new cultural values despite an ambiguous personality embodying several roles concomitantly. In this respect, Mac Linscott Ricketts suggests that the trickster is the creative transformer of the world and the heroic bringer of culture (Ricketts 327). Sherman goes further, suggesting the trickster respects no value, yet through his attitude, all values come into being<sup>200</sup> (Sherman 104). That is the case of Wright's characters. Big Boy, Richard and Bigger, by acting contrary to the alienating established ethics, permit to understand the importance of un-alienating ethics in society and the need for positive social transformations.

Although the trickster is sometimes considered as "a prankster who is grossly erotic, insatiably hungry, inordinately vain, deceitful, and cunning towards friends as well as foes; [...] and a blunderer who is often the victim of his own tricks and follies" (Ricketts 327), one cannot deny that, as Ricketts further claims, "oftentimes, he is the marker of earth and/or the one who changes the chaotic myth-world into the ordered creation of today; he is the slayer of monsters, the thief of daylight, fire, water, and the like for the benefit of man; he is the teacher of cultural skills and customs" (327). When applied to Wright's characters, Bigger in particular, it can be seen that although he is sometimes obscene, wandering, practicing erotic masturbation along with his friend Gus in the theater (*NS*, 36-37), his overall characterization testifies Wright's intention to use his character as a trickster figure to slay the monster of dispossession, to ignite protest fire and finally water down all the dominant group's propensity to oppress minorities.

To achieve their goals as trickster figures, Wright built his characters in a way to make it difficult for the dominant group to track them down thanks to the multi-faceted roles these characters play. They are difficult to be grasped by the dominant group because they connect to multiplicities in the Deleuzian sense of the word, in a way that one cannot understand them through their individual isolated actions. Bigger is like an Ancient Greek trickster capable of transforming himself into various natures according to new situations so as to better dominate

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<sup>200</sup> It is sometimes through his seemingly value-less behavior that the trickster figure makes his environment perceive the value of values. Sherman further contends that the trickster figure, most specifically the Greek one, knows "neither good nor evil; he is a creator and destroyer; moral and social values are at the mercy of his passions" (Sherman 104). To some extent, he does not define himself as he is constantly searching for himself and being always in a process of becoming, he lets people define him according to the actions he performs. Yet, his ultimate goal is to serve and defend his social environment against evil.

his opponent. The same goes for Richard in *Black Boy* who plays the fool and the ignorant black boy to get access to the library and steal what makes the dominant group powerful, namely knowledge. Shorty also plays the fool and snatches money from the white man and, yet, he does not hesitate to insult him when he is not around, as Richard testifies: ““You know what the bastard Olin said to me this morning?””, John would ask. [...] Yet, had a white man put in a sudden appearance we would have assumed silent, obedient smiles” (*BB*, 250, 251). By making Richard and Shorty play the fool and ignorant black boys before the white man and the librarian to get access to books and money, Wright uses dramatic irony to show that the members of the dominant group are the real fools as they ignore that Richard and Shorty, as black boys, are capable of such trickeries. As a trickster figure, Richard displays what can be called a *via negativa* attitude which consists in showing what he is not to reveal what he truly is<sup>201</sup>. Much like Richard in *Black Boy*, Bigger is also a trickster and tricks the whole major group for a long time before being unmasked. He also displays a *via negativa* attitude as he hides himself to make himself visible, keeps quiet to make himself audible, keeps on changing his shape or nature like a Greek Polymorphous to make his true nature or being stable, stands in ground zero or the margin to better step into the center without the center realizing it but finally compelled to acknowledge it as an undeniable reality to deal with. By so doing, Bigger becomes a complex character for his fictional world as well as for the readership.

Because of his complexity, Ricketts asserts that to understand the trickster figure, “we should attempt to do so not by splitting him up into logical parts, but by attempting to see what meaning he might have in all his complexity” (Ricketts 330), much like Fabre insists that, to understand Wright’s complex character, one should not take a split but consider him as an ideological whole (Fabre in Wideman 411). In the scene where Shorty takes the white man’s money, the reader may really be tempted to view him as a fool:

‘Just watch me get a quarter from the first white man,’ he told me as I stood in the elevator that morning. A white man who worked in the building stepped into the elevator and waited to be lifted to his floor. Shorty sang in a low mumble, smiling, rolling his eyes, looking at the white man roguishly. ‘I’m hungry, Mister White Man. I need a quarter for lunch.’ ‘The hell with you, Shorty,’ the white man said, ignoring him and chewing on his black cigar [...]. ‘But this black sonofabitch sure needs a quarter.’ [...] The white man laughed softly, jingled some coins in his pocket, took out one and thumbed it to the floor. Shorty stooped to pick it up and the white man bared his teeth and swung his foot into Shorty’s rump with the strength of his body. (*BB*, 249-250)

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<sup>201</sup> *The via negativa* rhetoric was initially developed in the Roman Catholic Church to preach the true nature of God. During sermons, the preachers focus on what God does not like to reveal what he likes and what he is not to reveal what he is. When *via negativa* rhetoric is used in literature, it gets close to irony as the character behaves negatively to reveal his positive sides. In other words, he poses negative acts so that his fictional environment could perceive the importance of good acts.

Indeed, anyone, including Richard in the narrative, would think Shorty is a real meaningless buffoon. Yet, there is revolutionary trickery lying behind his behavior as he, as a marginalized boy, is capable of obliging a member of the dominant group to give him a quarter. By the way, Shorty later lets Richard know that he is not a real fool, but that his attitude stems from an unconventional strategy to trick money from the white man. Shorty's behavior evidences that unless one considers Wright's trickster character as a whole, he is very likely to be misled by his occasional buffoonery and yet heroic actions. In the trickster figure's buffoonery, there are much more hidden and revolutionary messages being carried out. Bigger and Gus's imitation of the American President mirrors this important characteristic of the trickster figure. By imitating the white president and white cars, the hidden message is a questioning of possession relationship, a way for them to re-appropriate the white man's privilege in their psychological world so as to make it real one day. Nevertheless, Ricketts puts a damper suggesting that the trickster's imitating and trying to duplicate other people's attitudes can sometimes lead to disastrous results (Ricketts 336).

One should not lose sight of the disastrous results that trickster attitudes can result in as Gus and Bigger's overambitious fantasies of becoming white officials and respectively driving and flying white cars and planes, having sex with a white girl in a context of social separatism, finally result in Bigger's death sentence. One can say that Bigger's trickster fantasies have brought him to the electric chair, and that his death sentence symbolizes at the psychological level, not the only individual death sentence but a collective death sentence of all the black community, which has got much to do with the Jungian psychological perception of the trickster figure. As Carl Jung suggests, the trickster figure is:

The collective projection of a part of the unconscious that is known and welcomed by the individual. The trickster is the collective shadowy figure, an epitome of all the inferior traits of character in individuals. And since the individual shadow is never absent as a component of personality, the collective figure can construct itself out of it continually. (Jung in Ricketts 333)

To take Jung's argument further, one could contend that trickster figures such as Bigger and Richard are not simply individual psychologies but they epitomize the whole psychological status of all those who are submitted to dispossession. In other words, the trickster figure reveals that all those who are dispossessed carry within their psychology, just like the individual trickster, every inclination to trick the rules of dispossession so as to achieve possession, notwithstanding the fact that tricking these rules have been made taboos, the violation of which can result in devastating consequences such as death.

One of the identifiable features in the trickster character is his stubbornness in violating taboos established by the dominant group which appears as a transcendental force, as Richard admits: “To our minds the white folks formed a kind of super-world” (*BB*, 251). In the trickster’s mind, taboos are only made to be violated if they do not serve the interests of the world he defends. This is where the heroic role of the trickster comes to light as, indeed, he is aware that he can fail in his stubbornness in violating the taboo to bring about reform, but he never gives up, which makes him different from ordinary or conformist people. In the same vein, Ricketts applauds the merits of the trickster as a stubborn character:

If a man tries to do things for which he was never intended, the result can be only that he will make a fool of himself and probably get hurt in the process. Of course, the trickster [...] never learns this lesson, but he keeps on trying again and again, to do everything that others can do. The trickster is clever: to get food by slicing his thigh like the bear, peck worms out of tree trunks like the woodpecker. (Ricketts 338)

Taking Ricketts’s argument into account, Richard can be considered as a trickster hero in *Black Boy* as he perfectly fits into the trickster’s merits. As a matter of fact, his ‘trickstering’ earns him many troubles in his family and outside but he is determined to carry on until his objective is reached, that is social reform. Just as the trickster would “peck worms out of tree trunks like a woodpecker” (338), Richard pecks books (which is his non-physical food), out of the white library by making use of trickster techniques such as lying and playing the fool. Richard, as a trickster, is convinced that salvation is hidden in books (because they provide knowledge) but not in supernatural forces.

While those who are dominated and deprived sometimes seek salvation in supernatural beings as are the cases with Ella and Granny in *Black Boy*, Reverend Taylor in *Uncle Tom’s Children*, Reverend Hammond in *Native Son*, the trickster hero is rather aware that only pragmatic tricks can help escape dispossession and lead to repossession. Although he sometimes may be aware there are supernatural powers, he does not ask them for help. He can be “a believer but not a worshipper; he accepts the rules on his own conditions” (339), which leads him not to obey established taboos. That is certainly why Bigger disrespects Black-White sexual taboo and rapes Mary (*NS*, 80-81). By the same token, Big Boy in *Uncle Tom’s Children* disrespects the taboo of separate facilities rule and swims in Jim’s pool (*UTC*, 35), while Richard rejects religious control over his actions in *Black Boy* (*BB*, 123, 129). As Ricketts suggests,



The trickster belongs to anti-spiritualistic type of religious experience. He does not need to obtain his food in supernatural fashion, or to spore through the clouds or to be able to juggle his eyeballs, or to expel much like a skunk. Life is a struggle for man, to be sure, but he has been endowed by nature (and by the successful deeds of the trickster-fixer in the beginning) with sufficient resources, if he will but make use of them, to be victorious. (Ricketts 339, 340)

Clearly enough, Richard belongs to this anti-spiritualistic type as he can be seen opposing his mother's telling him to wait for God to provide them with food and is reluctant at worshipping Granny's God for his soul's redemption (*BB*, 123-124). Richard is rather convinced that life is really a struggle and, indeed, after refusing to be fed by benefactors when he is hunger-stricken, he struggles between the school, the street and work places to get his necessary daily bread. In one word, he uses the resources nature endows him to be victorious over hunger and other forms of dispossession. While religion advises man to be happy and thankful to God for his existence, the trickster is not merely happy to exist. He wants to ask questions about his surrounding environments and find answers so as to become the master of his environment (Ricketts 344) and, indeed, Richard shows this specific trickster attitude as he invades his mother with existential questions:

Can I go and peep at the white folks? [...] That wouldn't be wrong? [...] Mama, is Granny white? [...] I mean, do the white folks think she's white? [...] Granny looks white. [...] Then why is she living with us colored folks? [...] Did Granny become colored when she married Grandpa? [...] Why didn't Granny marry a white man? [...] What was Granny's name before she married Grand-pa? [...] Who gave her that name? [...] Couldn't Granny find out who her father was? [...] Mama, where did Father get his name? (*BB*, 56-57)

This scene takes place when Richard asks his mother, Ella, a series of questions related to the race issue when he starts becoming aware of the importance of skin color in his existence and in that of his family. And although Ella slaps him and wants to scare him with the white man's menace, Richard remains fearless. Not even his grandmother's trying through religious sermons to transmit him the fear of death can change his fearlessness.

Actually, the trickster does not fear death but his fearlessness is not the result of religion (Ricketts 334). Rather, it stems from his pragmatic acceptance of it as a normal and necessary thing while religion wants to escape death by talking about immortality after physical death (349). The only remedy to death for the trickster is tears followed by laughter as Bigger's "faint, wry, bitter smile" (*NS*, 327) in the final scene of *Native Son* testifies. His final smile before death "meets a human need directly, by enabling man to endure the burden of the failures of their lives in self-forgetful laughter" (Ricketts 347), which makes the difference between the trickster's spirituality and that of ordinary people. The trickster figure has got a worldly

spirituality which consists in transcending with the mind to render things non-mysterious but under the control of man (Doueïhi 288). By the same token, while showing the particularities of the trickster's spirituality, Ricketts interestingly remarks:

We may term this religion as 'a worldly religion', meaning a religion for this world. This religion exists in tension between two poles: The acceptance of the world as it is; and the belief that man can change the world [...]. That is to say, this viewpoint acknowledges (even as the trickster is forced to do), that there are limits to the possibilities open to man. Some of these are imposed by nature, some by the environment man has made for himself in the world. Within this limitation, each man has a life to live, which he is to live with all its powers; and by dint of struggle, he is to win from the powers of the universe all the goods of this life as he can. (Ricketts 348)

Wright, much like his own characters, adopted what Ricketts terms "worldly-religion," most specifically when he embraced the existentialist philosophy. Right from *Uncle Tom's Children*, it can be seen that all of Wright's protagonists struggle to change the world by their own deeds notwithstanding some religious forces epitomized by Granny, Reverend Taylor and Reverend Hammond sometimes acting as impediments on their way (*UTC* 156; *NS* 198; *BB* 129). There are a few telling examples where Wright shows how his characters use worldly-religious principles to become victorious over nature or their environment. In "Big Boy Leaves Home," Big Boy engages in a spectacular battle with the snake epitomizing nature and gets access to the hole as a hiding place from the white mob (*UTC*, 41-42). By the same token, white and black communists, in "Fire and Cloud," despite their limitations before the white man's universal power, fight together with worldly means to get the vital goods they need, namely food (*UTC*, 178). The whole of *Uncle Tom's Children* reveals a chaotic world made up of domination and oppression and where only perpetual worldly struggle can ensure survival.

From a trickster's perspective, the world is in constant disorder provoked by the various forces wanting to dominate the others so as to perpetuate or regenerate themselves. In such a chaotic world of domination and oppression, the trickster escapes the various forces at play as he dives into permanent revolutionary becoming which makes him slippery and enables him to create the new world he intends to inhabit. That is why Ricketts perceives the trickster as a creator, because "he brings order out of the chaotic myth world, and in the process, he becomes less chaotic himself" (Ricketts 341). For Ricketts, the trickster figure can be summed up in three basic roles:

He is a trickster, a worldly being of uncertain origin who lives by his wits and often injured and embarrassed by his foolish imitations [...] yet who never takes himself too seriously and never admits defeat; he is a transformer, a being of myth times who goes about doing things that set the pattern and form of the world for all time, acting customarily without apparent plan or forethought, and leaving the world as it is today,

having thus prepared it for mankind [...] and he is a culture hero who, unassisted, risks his life and limb in daring entanglements with supernatural powers in order that the world may be a better place for those who are to come. (343)

As is made clear, from a Rickettsean perspective, the trickster stands as a three-dimensional being who risks his life with overwhelming forces so that the weaker people could live in peace. In this respect, Bigger in *Native Son* is the perfect epitome of the trickster figure as conceptualized by Ricketts. Bigger is a worldly boy who plays the fool and yet capable of setting clever plans against the Daltons in a way that the latter never imagine he is capable of doing so. Although he is unmasked later and sentenced to death for his rape and crime, Bigger, much like the Rickettsean trickster figure, remains a myth for his social environment as he refuses to admit his defeat and contends that he did not commit any crime despite his judiciary culpability. "I didn't do it, Bigger screamed" (*NS*, 242). As Bigger is left unassisted by his own community members following his crime, he mouthpieces Max, his lawyer, and locks horns with the whole white judicial arsenal which he perceives as a supernatural force looming over him and threatening to crush him down. It is not until Max, who represents Bigger's thoughts, finishes his plea at the tribunal that the reader understands Wright really built Bigger as a trickster character struggling against the major force for the future generations of marginalized people to live without any cultural domination.

While acting trickster, one of the fundamental objectives of Wright's protagonists is to pervert the notion of cultural domination or superiority, or the notion of race. Viewed as a trickster character, Wright's protagonists perceive the world as a Deleuzean rhizomatic system where all cultures mingle, interweave and shape cultural hybridity, denying every hint at cultural purity or superiority as opposed to what some American supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan would think. In other words, the Ku Klux Klan's claims for white superiority becomes a mere myth that Wright did not hesitate to profane. If one considers that the trickster figure is the profanation of a myth, it is the profanation of the white man's myth, namely his superiority, that is at stake in *Native Son*. Bigger profanes this myth by sexually violating a white girl who is the epitome of white power and superiority. From the trickster's perspective, playing trickster is a message power and wholeness derive from taboo violation and, indeed, Bigger feels this wholeness after his murder of Mary and as the narrative asserts, "Never had he felt a sense of wholeness" before this murder (*NS*, 197). This wholeness gives him enough courage to further plan the ransom note and crook his victim's parents (*NS*, 150). While building such protagonists as Bigger, Wright himself could be seen, in a sense, as a trickster writer as he refused his racial identity and put forth his human one. For Wright, race was not his identity

and he easily traveled across every racial gathering much like a cosmopolitan citizen, or a culturally-hybrid citizen carrying black and white cultural traits. Acting as a hybrid being and disrespecting cultural categorization are perceived by some analysts as a trickster attitude. That is the case of James Conroy and Robert Davis for whom,

One of the attractions of the trickster is that he illuminates the ultimate impossibility [...] by teasingly reminding his audience that all cultures are hybrid, implicated, and compromised. The trickster figure travels so naturally across cultures, it might be argued, because his promiscuous intermingling and juxtaposing of categories [...] is sustained by an underlying recognition what unifies diverse peoples is the messiness of human interaction and the consequent futility of all pursuits of the ethnically or nationally pure. (Conroy, Davis 263)

As Conroy and Davis suggest, if the fact of illuminating the impossibility, reminding people of the hybridity of all cultures, and revealing the futility of ethnically or racially-pure claims are characteristics of a trickster figure, therefore, Wright was a trickster figure. In his whole life, he always fought against racial and ethnic definitions and this stance enabled him to travel easily across the various cultures of the world ranging from his early life in the United States to his travels to Africa, Europe, and Asia which surely strengthened him in his position that there was only one humanity with different peoples in one world where cultures should be interacting with each other, not dominating each other. Wright never accepted domination of whatever kind and this can be perceived through his autobiography *Black Boy*. Whether in his family or at school, he never acquiesced anyone's attempt to dominate him spiritually or intellectually, which put him at permanent odds with institutions. Although Conroy and Davis contend "the trickster in the classroom is never merely an outcast figure, a high-minded maverick condemned to institutional incomprehension and intellectual martyrdom" (269), Wright was made an outcast because of his high-minded non-conformism which put him at loggerheads with his family and school institutions. Because of the oppression inflicted by such institutions right from an early age, Wright could no longer trust anybody in his social environment.

The trickster character does not trust even benefactors, much like Bigger in *Native Son* who is reluctant at accepting Jan and Mary's offer to get him, as a marginalized black boy, closer to the dominant white majority, and at Max's proposal to defend his case before the judges following his arrest for murder<sup>202</sup>. Possessing a multitude of roles, the initial trickster

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<sup>202</sup> For Philip Metman, the trickster figure distrusts everybody because he is usually the victim of painful experiences such as blows and humiliations due to his unconventional character. The trickster really experiences a sum of "unending mass of distressing experience culminating in an apotheosis of paranoid behavior when he

was viewed as dangerously outside of societal boundaries (Jeffries 292), just as Bigger would initially be perceived by the reader as a rough beast representing a danger for society. Yet, as one moves forward into the ideological implications of the novel, one can understand that Bigger is rather a trickster playing a revolutionary role in a permanent longing for the minor group to enjoy social change towards more consideration by the major group. To achieve that goal, the trickster figure advocates for the redefinition of social roles. In other words, the trickster figure represents,

the longing of a powerless group class or race for social or political change, for transcendence over an oppressive order of relationship [...], for freedom from fixed ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, acting; a revolt against a whole complex of 'givens' coded into a society, a revolt which may affect not only an oppressed group, class, or race but a whole order, the settled institutions and repetitive rituals of a whole civilization (Sertima in Jeffries 293).

Wright's characters use the trickster's style to become resilient and warriors like Deleuze's war machines: "We define 'war machine' as a linear arrangement which is built on lines of flight. In this respect, war is not at all the object of the war machine; its object is a very special and smooth space which it composes, occupies and widens"<sup>203</sup> (Deleuze, 1990, 50). In other words, these war machines are not made up of physical tanks and aircraft but the use of specific language to communicate and voice their grievances against the oppressive system without being caught and lynched. As already shown earlier, not only do Wright's characters use encoded language such as the Black American vernacular English, riddles and songs against oppression, but also mock American mainstream standards of successful life. As Jeffries observes, "one of the trickster's goals is social non-conformity by redefinition of norms of life and existence in mainstream American society, [...] the use of high standards and resilience against mainstream expectations of failure, incompetence, or laziness" (Jeffries 293). That is why in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Bigger and Richard pervert every social norm by redefining their own norms such as violence, stealing, or rape. By perverting what is commonly accepted as the standard norms to follow, Bigger and Richard are modern Wrightean trickster figures which reveal the discrepancies between existing ideals and their real lives.

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distrusts genuinely innocent goodwill" (Metman 8). Because he distrusts everybody, he sees everything at an individual level since he cannot trust but his own self (8).

<sup>203</sup> « Nous définissons la 'machine de guerre' comme un agencement linéaire qui se construit sur des lignes de fuite. En ce sens, la machine de guerre n'a pas du tout pour objet la guerre ; elle a pour objet un espace très spécial, espace lisse, qu'elle compose, occupe et propage. »

## CONCLUSION

If writing is *inaugural*, it is not because it creates, but through a certain absolute freedom to say and to do, writing makes the already-there arise in its sign [...]. Freedom of response which recognizes the world-history as its sole horizon. [...] To create is to reveal. [...] It is indeed access to free speech [...]. It creates meaning by consigning it, by entrusting it to an engraving, to a furrow, to a relief, to a surface that one wants to endlessly transmit<sup>204</sup>.

Derrida, 1967, 23

Certainly, Derrida was not thinking specifically about Wright when he made this comment. However, Wright's writing can, undoubtedly, be seen as the inauguration of a brand new Black American literary model: the black protest novel. Through this literary genre, Wright snatched his freedom of speech and uncompromisingly depicted the experience of Black America and of Black Americans like himself. Taking present history as his sole referential horizon, he revealed the dispossession of his community and proposed non-conformist writing as a tool to fight all forms of dispossession in an attempt at regaining possession. The analysis of Wright's protest writing in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* through the lenses of Deleuze's and Derrida's respective theories of the margin and fragmentation led to significant results and conclusions.

Dispossession has been a long-standing issue in Black American literature. Early writers used slave narratives to project their multi-faceted predicament but it was more vigorously portrayed and denounced by a contemporary writer like Wright. The Chicagoan sociological school served him as a scaffold to craft his own literary model against dispossession. As Wright himself experienced dispossession, the protest novel genre served him as a springboard to denounce the role his family and the public sphere played as oppressive forces. As a matter of fact, the writer found himself at odds with his family, and his family's spiritual vision, as well as with his social environment because of his deconstructionist and non-conformist ideas. He wanted to take concrete actions against his powerless experience of dispossession. Wright transformed his powerlessness into powerfulness through writing. As Derrida states, "The strength of our weakness is that powerlessness separates, disengages, emancipates. From then on, one can better perceive totality, panorama is possible"<sup>205</sup> (12). Wright's powerlessness to

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<sup>204</sup> « Si l'écriture est inaugurale, ce n'est pas parce qu'elle crée, mais par une certaine liberté absolue de dire, de faire surgir le déjà-là en son signe. Liberté de réponse qui reconnaît pour seul horizon le monde-histoire. [...] Créer c'est révéler. [...] C'est bien l'accès à la libre parole [...]. Elle crée le sens en le consignant, en le confiant à une gravure, à un sillon, à un relief, à une surface que l'on veut transmissible à l'infini. »

<sup>205</sup> « La force de notre faiblesse, c'est que l'impuissance sépare, désengage, émancipe. Dès lors, on peut mieux percevoir la totalité, le panorama est possible. »

American oppressive socio-political forces led him to the path of protest writing which enabled him to disengage or separate himself from his oppressive milieu and to panoramically denounce it. Wright mostly drew his protest writing techniques from already-existing white protest writers like Mencken, Dreiser and Sinclair who helped him position and sharpen his technique against the oppressive environment. With Wright's emergence as a protest writer, he climbed up the artistic ladder to be recognized as one of the leading figures of Black American literature. He gained his literary fame by writing from the margin, which characterizes the combination of deconstructionist thoughts with Black American folklore, to fight the dominant mainstream culture and its influence over Black Americans' own culture.

The current study has revealed that dispossession is multi-faceted in Wright's works of art. As a matter of fact, at the psycho-social level, Wright's oppressed characters are totally dispossessed of any voice in their fictional microcosm. People like Bigger Thomas and Richard are literally relegated to the margin and have no say in the territorialized speech of the center. Being dispossessed of the power of speech is seen through Bigger's inability to utter a single word while he is faced with his death sentence, and through Richard being compelled to keep quiet within his own family. Both family and society are deaf and blind to their individualities, which further aggravates the characters' social marginalization. Because the social environment is marked by misunderstandings and hatred, physical territorialization is exacerbated by those who are in the center to keep the dominated social group in the margin. The Black Belt and the White Neighborhood, the "No Trespassing" signpost and Bobo's lynching for trespassing into Jim's swimming pool are clear indications of this hard reality. In such circumstances, Wright's protagonists simply become placeless individuals and such a placelessness impacts them psychologically.

As the protagonists are socially excluded and coerced, their existence is punctuated with emotional suffering in its fundamental and essential nature and they are bound to struggle with emotional and psychological distress due to their *super ego*'s dispossession. This portrayal of emotionally and psychologically suffering of Blacks mirrors Wright's intention "to combat the myth of an always happy Black whom racists too often used to play down the effects of oppression"<sup>206</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 202). Nevertheless, Wright's thirst for genuine and full freedom may have kept him from seeing that some oppressed Blacks were resilient and could still enjoy their lives in spite of ravaging discrimination and marginalization.

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<sup>206</sup> « Il avait insisté sur le dénuement et les limites de l'existence noire pour combattre le mythe du Noir toujours heureux que les racistes utilisaient trop souvent pour minimiser les effets de l'oppression. »

In Wright's fictional world, the political system as conceived by the dominant group marginalizes those who are dominated so that they are kept far away from the center. If in spite of judicial dispossession oppressed people try to reach the center of justice, they have to face the fact: "moral law, judicial law and natural law are all implicated in the dramatization and discussion of the condition of being before the law, subject to an imperative to which unmediated access is impossible" (Derrida, 1992, 182). Inaccessibility of law was true to Wright's real life as he projected it through Bigger's characterization. "Wright broke socio-moral laws in the South; he behaved like a criminal without the slightest remorse since the laws which defined him were unfair"<sup>207</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 203). Moreover, access to justice was only possible for the wealthy who perpetrated socio-economic dispossession.

The study also reveals socio-economic dispossession by looking into the housing conditions of Wright's marginalized characters. Because they have no jobs and no financial means to afford for decent housing, they are simply piled up in scanty houses where they lose every sense of intimacy. This reflects Wright's own real-life experience when his family moved to Memphis and as we are made to understand through Fabre's account in 1986:

As there were no jobs in Natchez and the Wrights could not live longer on Wilson's assistance, Nathan [Wright's father] decided to try his luck in an industrial area and to embark his family on this migration. They thus went to Memphis. [...] In this dreary and dirty environment, where bricks and stones replaced Natchez's greenery and wood, only a small courtyard served as a playground for children. (15)

The psychological consequences of dispossession are devastating for Wright's protagonists. Because they are dispossessed of everything and powerless to their plight, brooding ends up ushering them into psychological instability which is manifested through daily fear sensations. It is as though the oppressed characters are walking on eggs and must pay attention to their oppressive environment for fear of the white man or of Jim Crow laws. Actually, Wright's characters' fears and psychological instability are only epitomes of his own real-life experience he intended to denounce. Fabre informs us that Wright's early life was marked by psychological instability which made him delve into timidity. "His timidity overwhelmed him every time he had to write on the black board, read aloud, or simply say his

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<sup>207</sup> « Wright transgressait les normes socio-morales du Sud ; il se comportait en criminel, sans le moindre remords puisque les lois qui le définissaient étaient illégitimes. »



name. This sudden shyness and inability to perform the simplest tasks before an audience became second nature”<sup>208</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 20).

Socio-cultural instability is basically marked by fragmentation which is manifested through the characters’ inability to situate themselves in their social environment or to build a stable life. To Wright, this was his way to “compel the American reader to consider the South from Blacks’ perspective, to understand that all social structures, laws, and the whole etiquette of cross-racial relations aimed at assigning the black person to a place he/she is forbidden to escape from”<sup>209</sup> (203). That is why “Wright reacted very early by rebelling against his family, his environment and stereotypes through spoken words, actions, and evasion to which literature widely paved the way”<sup>210</sup> (203). In other words, Wright’s writing showcases the impossibility of the black subject to fit neither into the white culture nor his own, because of his double-consciousness (Du Bois, 1905). This socio-cultural fragmentation forces Blacks into constant flight to retrieve their genuine identity.

Flight is another motif of Wright’s characters’ socio-cultural fragmentation. All through his novels, black characters are in constant flight to escape the violence of their environment and this remains a constant literary motif of Wright’s own life. Yet, when one is constantly fleeing from one place to another, fragmentation gets worse as the fleeing character cannot identify himself/herself with any fixed socio-cultural entity. Most of the time, escaping only ends when the fugitive meets death and, indeed, the majority of Wright’s fleeing characters finally get lynched. The black characters who escape constant flight and death are those who adopt assimilationist adjustment to the conditions of dispossession. They take their deprivations and stereotypes for granted even though this attitude, too, puts them in socio-cultural barrenness and a non-identity position (*BB*, 45). Assimilation and adjustment are ironical since they reveal the opposite of Wright’s critical position. Indeed, “[Wright] was able to substitute the acceptance of subservient heritage with the quest for his own values [...]. He did not spare the black community in his criticism, a community that years of oppression had riddled too much

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<sup>208</sup> « Sa timidité l’accable chaque fois qu’il doit écrire au tableau noir, lire à haute voix, ou seulement dire son nom. Ce mutisme soudain et cette incapacité à exécuter les gestes les plus simples devant un auditoire deviendront une seconde nature. »

<sup>209</sup> « *Black Boy* contraignait le lecteur américain à considérer le Sud du point de vue Noir, à comprendre que toutes les structures sociales, toutes les lois, toute l’étiquette des relations interraciales ont pour dessein d’assigner au Noir une place dont il lui est interdit de s’évader. »

<sup>210</sup> « Wright avait très tôt réagi en se rebellant contre sa famille, son milieu et les idées reçues, révolte en paroles, en actions et par le biais de l’évasion dont la littérature devient bientôt la voie royale. »

with Uncle Tom's behavior"<sup>211</sup> (Fabre, 1986, 203). That is why he used critical and provocative language to denounce Blacks' assimilationist attitude.

Wright's objective was to use language as an effective tool to show how his characters are able to overcome dispossession. Wright used language in a naturalistic, straightforward and provocative manner to escape marginalization and to move from dispossession to possession, a struggling strategy which has been referred to as "wri(gh)ting. Thus, writing, or "wri(gh)ting" really enabled the author to de-territorialize his entire social, cultural, economic and political environments to recover recognition. Wright created purposeful tension between the racist or moralistic society and his humanistic protagonists, which enables them to achieve repossession by denying the family code of conduct, by breaking away from alienating communist and ethical conventions, by playing trickster against socio-economic and political oppression. When all these strategies fail, violence is included as a legitimate alternative to recover, at least, some sense of self-directed self.

Wright's great leap in understanding, notwithstanding his global fame and notoriety, revolved around his regular use of violence in his fictions as means of enabling his black characters to attain their full humanity. While his thematic obsession with black violence was shocking, Wright never flattered his black audiences; until the end of his life he challenged and criticized the health and value of the black cultural tradition. (Jackson, 2006)

Wright exaggerated use of violence in his works stemmed from his own admiration of Blacks who used violence to enjoy some sense of freedom and as he admitted in "How Bigger Was Born," violent Blacks "left a marked impression upon [him] because he longed secretly to be like [them] and was afraid" (NS, 331). It may be this fear of real-life violence that motivated Wright to translate it into fiction. In other words, violent protest in Wright's works may be the expression of his repressed psychological longing for violence.

The initial aim of this study was to unravel the connection between dispossession and the protagonists' and Wright's use of non-conformism to counteract their plight and move from dispossession to repossession. Deleuze's concept of "minor literature" and Derrida's theory of fragmentation reveal that Wright de-territorialized the dominant standards and re-territorialized them into his own literary territory to make the cultural values of the minor group visible. De-territorialization is, therefore, an evacuation of social and cultural norms perceptible in language

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<sup>211</sup> « Il était parvenu à substituer à l'acceptation d'un héritage de soumission la quête de ses propres valeurs, [...] englobant dans sa critique la communauté noire, que des années d'oppression avaient trop bien imprégné du comportement de l'Oncle Tom. »

and behavior. With his technique, Wright definitely succeeded in moving his protagonists from marginalization and fragmentation to recognition. In other words, his protest writing enables them to move from a fragmented and lost identity to claim for a recognized one. Just like his characters, Wright moved from marginalization to recognition as protest literature enabled him to write from the margin and thus to draw the attention of the American literary canon to his literary model. Very few black novelists could create so much tension and social truth as Wright did. Yet, it is precisely the ability to create this permanent tension and social truth in his works which gained him recognition among his readers and peers.

Because Wright praised individuality while the black individual was oppressed by Jim Crow laws, he fled to France where he embraced existentialism. It turned out to be more suitable to him and to the expression of his preference for the fully free self. Once in France, he went on protesting against the various forms of dispossession that he already had projected through *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. For Wright, "All literature is protest and you can't name a single novel that isn't protest" (Wright in Moskowitz 2008). And even though Baldwin countered that "all literature might be protest but all protest was not literature" (*ibid*), Wright definitely disagreed with "all that art-for-art's sake crap" (*ibid*). Wright's individual protest writing impacted the Black American literary landscape, including Baldwin who recognized "he had identified [him-] self with him long before" and that "Richard Wright had a tremendous effect on a countless number of people whom he never met, multitudes whom he will now never meet" (*ibid*). Professor Dan McCall probably echoes the best comment on Wright's legacy in contemporary American literature:

Wright is the father of the contemporary black writer because when we come to Wright's best work we are faced with the central question about being black in America. Richard Wright was the first man to put it to us with all its naked power...the farther we get from Richard Wright and his modes of thought, the better we can see the extent of the debt we owe him...However outmoded some of his weapons may seem now, Richard Wright was the man who first conquered the big ground...The achievement of Richard Wright came from his determined ability to explore his own individual suffering and create from it crucial examples of what "all the long centuries" mean. (*ibid*)

The significance of the current study lies in my intention to open up a new path to consider dispossession and non-conformism in Wright's novels which, contrary to what traditional critics claim, go beyond the mere matter of race struggle, and fit into a trans-historical, transcultural and transracial framework. By deploying the philosophical-literary concepts of "margin" and "minor", this study proposed an innovative critical tool and new

alternatives to traditional literary criticism to dispossession and non-conformism. However, some limitations must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study only focuses on three novels by Wright, which leaves open the debate of dispossession and non-conformism in the other ones. Moreover, if we read Deleuze's opinion, "Writing is a matter of becoming, always unfinished, always building itself" (Deleuze, 1993, 11). Similarly, the current study cannot boast having achieved a comprehensive analysis of dispossession and non-conformism in Wright's three works. Rather, it analyzes the two issues from a combined Deleuzian and Derridean perspective and can only trigger further debates over these issues. As Deleuze and Guattari put it:

A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously for matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute a book subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. It is to fabricate a beneficent God to explain geological movements. In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movement deterritorialization and destratification. [...] We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things [...]. (3, 4)

I simply believe a book has no intrinsic meaning because writing is the collection of other writings which are in turn the collection of other writings and so on and so forth. In other words, "Writing [...] indefinitely and systematically carries us to some other writing" (Derrida, 1991, 152).

While this study claims that non-conformism enabled Wright and his characters to move from dispossession to repossession, other issues can still be laid out for future research. As many of Wright's protagonists get killed in their quest for repossession, is there no other less risky alternatives to achieve repossession? Drawing on Fabre's landmark biography on Wright, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, Wright's own non-conformist quest for social and cultural repossession for himself and for the whole black community remained unfinished since he was compelled to leave his home country. He died in France in 1960 from a heart attack while Black Americans persistently were the poorest and most culturally marginalized in the United States. With Wright's death, black America was in dire need of a Wright-like messiah (in terms of black protest writing) and of a spokesperson to continue the open protest against dispossession and to claim for the repossession of deprived rights. There is no intention here to argue that no Black American writers followed in Wright's footsteps. For sure, they did and some of them such as Maya Angelou, John Edgar Wideman, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker were also famous literary prize winners. The point, however, is that after Wright's death, I

remain deeply convinced Black American protest writers up to his standards are still to be found.

That is the reason why I state, in the framework of future research perspectives, it would be critically rewarding to investigate Wright's recent and continuous impact on the artistic North-American landscape, as a number of theatrical and cinematographic adaptations of *Native Son* continue to flourish. For example, one could look into Percival Everett's recent parody of *Native Son* entitled *Erasure* (2001), and Nambi E. Kelley's play entitled *Native Son* staged in 2014, in order to figure out how dispossession and non-conformism are projected through these current adaptations and are still at the heart of writers' preoccupations. Thus, I hope this research work will pave the way for future research into the concepts of dispossession and non-conformism in African-American artistic works such as Chester Himes's *Cast the First Stone* (1952), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and Alice Walker's *Color Purple* (1982). These novels, along with more recent fictions written in the 2000s (Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), *The Nickel Boys* (2020) for instance) could offer interesting critical ground on Jim Crow America and the fight for dignity and redemption by its black victims.

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## **APPENDIX**

# 1. Richard Wright's Interview with *L'Express* on 18 August 1960<sup>212</sup>

Propos recueillis par la rédaction de *L'Express* (en 1960), publié le 19/10/2018 à 07 :30

## Source:

[https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/1960-entretien-avec-richard-wright\\_2027196.htm](https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/1960-entretien-avec-richard-wright_2027196.htm)  
[Access June 4, 2020]

**L'Express : Votre dernier livre *Fish Belly* traite de la position d'un homme de couleur au sein d'une civilisation blanche. Est-ce pour vous le problème fondamental ?**

**Richard Wright :** Le problème de l'homme noir au sein d'une civilisation blanche est lui-même conditionné par un problème de couleur plus important à l'échelle mondiale. On se trouve maintenant en présence de ce que l'on pourrait appeler une majorité de couleur dans le monde et c'est pourquoi les communautés de couleur vivant dans des Etats à majorité blanche constituent une espèce de test.

**Quelqu'un a dit : "La couleur, c'est ma patrie" ? Quelle est votre position personnelle ?**

La couleur n'est pas ma patrie. Je suis un être humain avant d'être un Américain ; je suis un être humain avant d'être un Noir et si je traite des problèmes raciaux, c'est parce que ces problèmes ont été créés sans mon consentement, sans ma permission. Je suis opposé à toute définition raciale. Si j'écris sur les problèmes raciaux, c'est précisément pour mettre fin aux définitions raciales. Et je ne souhaite pas que qui que ce soit dans le monde où nous vivons se place à un point de vue racial, qu'il soit blanc, noir ou jaune.

**Qu'avez-vous en commun avec les écrivains noirs français ou avec d'autres écrivains noirs ?**

Je les connais, je les ai lus, je sympathise avec le combat qu'ils mènent, j'ai participé à leurs organisations, mais je ne peux pas dire que je formule toujours ces problèmes comme eux. La plupart des écrivains asiatiques et africains avec lesquels je suis entré en contact sont des personnes profondément pénétrées du sentiment religieux et qui prolongent leurs conceptions religieuses dans leurs œuvres et dans leurs luttes politiques, ce qui paraît assez étrange à quelqu'un qui, comme moi, vient des Etats-Unis. Aux Etats-Unis, nous combattons pour une mise en application réelle de notre Constitution, ce qui n'est pas le cas des nations africaines ; nous luttons pour être intégrés à une civilisation que nous acceptons. Nous ne sommes pas contre l'Occident, mais nous voulons l'application effective des principes de liberté de l'Occident.

**Où êtes-vous né ?**

Dans le Mississippi. Le Mississippi n'est qu'un immense ghetto noir, une immense prison dans laquelle les Blancs sont les geôliers et les Noirs les détenus. Et le mouvement d'intégration qui se dessine aux Etats-Unis n'a pas encore touché cet Etat.

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<sup>212</sup> Wright gave this interview just three months before his death. I deem it important to insert it here as an appendix to permit the reader to perceive how he exposed his understanding of race relations in the United States and his overall commitment as a protest writer. Even though he claimed during the interview that he was not a "crusade writer", his whole literary career left no doubt that he was a protest writer and was recognized as such by the American literary landscape.

**Avez-vous personnellement une expérience de la vie de ce que l'on appelle aux Etats-Unis "Jim Crow" ?**

Tout Noir a l'expérience de ce qu'est la vie de "Jim Crow". Du simple fait qu'il y naît, la première chose qu'il sait, quand il naît dans le Mississippi, est qu'il est né dans un ghetto. Ainsi commence pour lui l'expérience de la vie "Jim Crow". Il fréquentera les cours d'une école "Jim Crow", assistera aux offices religieux dans une église "Jim Crow" ; s'il prend un autobus, ce sera un autobus "Jim Crow", s'il entre dans un restaurant pour prendre un repas, ce sera encore un restaurant "Jim Crow" ; bref, il poursuivra cette existence de "Jim Crow" jusqu'au cimetière, car, quand il mourra, ce sera d'une mort de "Jim Crow". Du berceau jusqu'au tombeau, il sera soumis à une discrimination raciale qui ne prendra même pas fin avec son trépas. Telle est l'existence des Noirs des Etats du Sud. C'est contre cela que sont organisées leurs grèves des "bras croisés" : contre cette dure discrimination raciale qui n'abdique même pas devant la mort.

**Est-ce pour fuir cela que vous êtes venu en Europe ?**

Oui, pour vivre dans un monde plus large et plus libre. J'y trouve encore certaines restrictions raciales, mais elles ne sont en rien comparables à celles qui règnent là-bas, à cette atmosphère de ghetto.

**Avez-vous l'intention de rester ici ?**

Je suis chez moi ici.

**Vous ne pensez pas retourner en Amérique ?**

Je n'en ai pas la moindre intention. Je n'ai pas de famille là-bas, personne qui m'attende, je me sens parfaitement bien ici, j'y fais mon travail. Je dirais même que, malheureusement, j'ai pu jusqu'à présent écrire des livres sur les Etats-Unis sans avoir à retourner là-bas pour le faire, car la situation n'y évolue que lentement ; certaines modifications ont bien eu lieu, mais ce ne sont pas, jusqu'à présent tout au moins, des modifications qualitatives.

**Que pensez-vous de la question de l'intégration scolaire des enfants noirs aux Etats-Unis?**

Eh bien ! J'ai des données sur cette question. Le verdict de la Cour Suprême a été prononcé en 1954, c'est-à-dire il y a six ans ; au cours de cette période, moins de 6% des enfants noirs ont été intégrés. C'est-à-dire donc, au rythme de 5 à 6% en six ans, qu'il faudra environ un siècle pour que l'intégration des enfants noirs soit complètement réalisée. Je me suis entretenu avec des personnes qualifiées et elles m'ont assuré que si des changements ont eu lieu, ce ne sont pas encore des changements qualitatifs et qu'un enfant noir ne peut pas s'introduire dans le système de l'enseignement américain sans se voir psychologiquement crucifié. Cela ne peut manquer d'avoir une influence néfaste sur la personnalité des élèves noirs.

**En Europe, vous êtes reconnu et salué comme un grand écrivain. Quelle audience trouvez-vous aux Etats-Unis ?**

Elle a varié selon les livres que j'ai écrits. L'un d'eux, intitulé Puissance Noire, qui annonce la montée du nationalisme noir en Afrique, a été mis au pilon deux semaines après sa publication. L'Amérique est un puissant système économique qui, tournant sur son propre axe, n'entretient que des rapports très lointains avec la réalité du reste du monde. Puissance Noire n'a rencontré que scepticisme et dédain, aussi bien chez les Noirs que chez les Blancs. Il a été accueilli avec plus de compréhension en Europe, où l'on a une connaissance plus intelligente de ces problèmes : les Européens ont des colonies en Afrique et ils ont pressenti ce qui s'y préparait. Il est assez étrange de constater que mon livre sur l'Espagne a reçu de meilleures critiques aux Etats-Unis que Puissance Noire ou Le Rideau de Couleur, bien que les Américains aient été choqués de voir un Noir commenter des réalités blanches. Je renversais les rôles. Jusque-là,

c'étaient les Blancs qui se rendaient en Asie ou en Afrique pour y faire leurs commentaires sur les problèmes autochtones...

### **Vous êtes d'abord un romancier ; le roman constitue-t-il pour vous une arme ?**

On m'a souvent défini comme un écrivain engagé. Personnellement, je ne me considère pas comme un "crusading writer", je m'imagine très bien le choc que peuvent créer chez autrui les choses que je dis. Les faits que nous avons à mentionner, nous autres écrivains noirs, ne sont pas toujours roses. Si nous en parlons d'une façon brutale et très directe, ils peuvent avoir sur autrui une influence parfois électrisante et parfois démoralisante, et peuvent parfois prendre l'aspect d'une attaque. C'est pourquoi je m'efforce de garder toujours une juste mesure dans mes livres. Je m'efforce d'apprécier ce que les lecteurs sont capables d'ingurgiter sans avoir l'impression que j'exagère. Par exemple, je me suis rendu en Indonésie pour faire un reportage sur la conférence de Bandoeng et j'ai entendu à cette occasion des choses parfois atroces. Je les ai vérifiées et j'ai pu constater qu'elles étaient l'exacte vérité. Ainsi par exemple, sous l'occupation japonaise, les Japonais avaient interné tous les Hollandais et des gardiens japonais exerçaient la surveillance sur ces camps de concentration où étaient enfermés des hommes, des femmes et des enfants. Mais lorsque les Japonais commencèrent à essuyer des revers, il fut nécessaire pour eux de transférer vers les théâtres d'opération les hommes qui gardaient ces camps. Ils durent donc recourir à des indigènes, c'est-à-dire des Indonésiens, pour assurer la garde de ces camps. Et, chose étrange, la mentalité des Hollandais était telle qu'ils étaient tout disposés à accepter d'être gardés par des Japonais, mais qu'ils se refusaient à avoir pour gardiens des Indonésiens. Et les Hollandais protestèrent violemment auprès des autorités japonaises, qui leur dirent : "Vous n'avez qu'à prendre des gardiens hollandais". Et l'on m'a affirmé que les Hollandais dirent alors aux indigènes indonésiens : "Si vous touchez à une seule de nos femmes, si vous les violez, lorsque nous sortirons d'ici, nous tuerons 1000 Indonésiens pour chaque femme blanche que vous aurez touchée". Et les Indonésiens, m'a-t-on dit, furent tellement outragés par cette insulte, alors qu'on venait pour la première fois de leur confier une mission "honorabile" - quoi que nous puissions en penser - qu'ils essayèrent de se racheter aux yeux des Hollandais d'une façon qui, à nos yeux, peut paraître pour le moins étrange. Ils firent sortir du camp les femmes blanches, les alignèrent contre une palissade, mirent une mitrailleuse en batterie et les abattirent. Puis ils revinrent vers les Hollandais et leur dirent : "Alors, avons-nous 'touché' vos femmes, les avons-nous touchées sexuellement ?" N'est-ce pas là une chose horrible ?

### **Que voulaient-ils, quel était exactement leur but ?**

Ils étaient profondément irrités, ils voulaient prouver aux Hollandais : "Nous ne sommes pas ce que vous pensez, ce que nous voulons, ce n'est pas vos femmes, c'est la liberté". Or, peut-on vraiment considérer que la façon la plus propre d'agir soit de commettre des meurtres ? Je réfléchis à la question et je me dis : "Non, c'est trop atroce, je ne peux pas raconter une chose pareille. Je ne crois pas que l'Occident puisse impunément entendre une chose pareille". C'était trop horrible. Vous comprenez ce que je veux dire ? Il y avait là, à cette conférence de Bandoeng, vingt-neuf nations liées entre elles par une vague de haine, de dégradation, un sens de frustration. C'étaient là des hommes profondément offensés, offensés dans le sens le plus profond de ce terme, ils avaient été bafoués dans leur religion, dans leur sens de l'honneur, et ils étaient sous le coup d'une violente irritation. Et je me dis : "Essayons de présenter les choses d'une façon positive, d'une façon qui puisse avoir un effet purifiant sur l'Occident aussi bien que sur les indigènes eux-mêmes".

### **Y a-t-il aux Etats-Unis une littérature noire vraiment importante et comptez-vous des amis parmi ces écrivains ?**

Oui, beaucoup. La littérature noire aux Etats-Unis est actuellement si importante qu'elle finit même par préoccuper notre gouvernement ! Les Noirs américains portent un témoignage sur le plus moderne des pays occidentaux, les Etats-Unis. Or, je suis certain qu'il y a une centaine d'années, personne n'aurait pu prévoir que les nègres exerceraient un jour la moindre influence sur les événements mondiaux. Et pourtant, c'est ce qui se passe à l'heure actuelle. Aux Etats-Unis, on a tendance à dire aux écrivains noirs : "Ne vous préoccupez pas de votre expérience en tant que nègres, ne polarisez pas ; vous êtes des hommes, écrivez exactement comme le feraient n'importe quels autres hommes sur n'importe quel sujet". Moi, j'aurais tendance à leur dire : "Bien au contraire, prenez pour sujet votre expérience de la vie en ghetto, car c'est là précisément un sujet universel, et si l'on vous critique, laissez faire."

### **Qu'entendez-vous par le titre de votre livre Fish Belly ?**

Ce titre a une certaine portée symbolique ; l'estomac d'un poisson est généralement blanc, mais cela ne se voit pas de l'extérieur, et ce que je voulais faire comprendre au lecteur, c'est que mon personnage regarde avec des yeux de Noir les valeurs des Blancs, mais qu'il a entièrement absorbé les valeurs de la société dans laquelle il vit... C'est ce qu'un de ses compagnons de jeux exprime dans le livre lorsqu'il dit : "Le ventre des poissons est blanc".

### **Peut-être pourriez-vous dire quelques mots du titre anglais The Long Dream, qui semble un peu moins clair ?**

Ce titre a une signification ironique en ce sens que le rêve d'identification aux valeurs blanches de Fish Belly ne peut pas se réaliser étant donné les circonstances. Lorsque son père lui dit : "Ne te laisse pas entraîner trop loin par ton rêve", cela signifie : "Si tu crois véritablement ce qu'affirme la Constitution, tu te feras tuer". C'est une situation très spéciale : en général, on désire qu'un citoyen respecte et croie en la Constitution de son pays, qu'il règle sa vie d'après elle. Mais si un Noir américain avait la prétention de jouir intégralement des droits que cette Constitution lui confère, il risque de se trouver en danger de lynchage. Voilà ce que j'entends par Long Dream.

### **Quel est exactement le genre de sentiments que les Blancs américains nourrissent pour leurs Noirs ?**

Vous posez là le doigt sur un des problèmes les plus graves. Il faut que je m'exprime ici en termes très mesurés. Il n'est pas vrai que l'Américain ait la haine du nègre. Il aime le nègre, mais comme un homme qui, la nuit, dans son lit, aime sa bouillotte d'eau chaude... C'est une espèce d'amour avide, il aime en profiter, l'utiliser. A l'époque de l'esclavage, les rapports les plus intimes existaient entre les Blancs et leurs esclaves ; vous seriez étonnés de nos jours d'apprendre à quel point ces rapports étaient proches. Les Blancs prétendaient qu'il ne devait y avoir nul contact entre Blancs et Noirs ; malgré cela, ces contacts existaient. Les Blancs possédaient les femmes noires, donnant naissance à toute une caste de mulâtres, utilisaient les hommes comme des bêtes de somme, et les vendaient comme du bétail. La dégradation qui en résulta - et cela, les Blancs commencent à s'en rendre compte aujourd'hui - affecta bien plus profondément les Blancs eux-mêmes que les Noirs. Les Noirs subissaient cette dégradation sans l'accepter, sans l'aimer, tandis que les Blancs s'abaissèrent eux-mêmes jusqu'au niveau de leurs esclaves, et c'est là que réside toute l'horreur de la chose. Je crois qu'Abraham Lincoln a profondément compris le fond du problème lorsqu'il déclara : "Je ne voudrais pas être un esclave, mais je ne voudrais pas davantage... être un maître".

### **Mais dans votre livre, la jeune fille blanche qui a aimé le Noir finit par le haïr ?**

Il est vrai que, en ce qui concerne la Blanche, comme c'est le cas dans le roman, cette jeune Blanche dénonce le jeune Noir et le fait lyncher. Je crois qu'il est nécessaire de faire ici quelques commentaires sur la civilisation blanche dans son ensemble : comme vous le savez, dans le monde occidental, dans les pays à civilisation puritaine, les jeunes filles sont soumises à de nombreuses restrictions. Dans les milieux puritains, l'idée de l'acte sexuel s'accompagne d'une réprobation, est considérée comme quelque chose de mal, de honteux. C'est pourquoi une jeune fille, comme celle de mon livre se trouve dans la situation très ambiguë qui consiste à désirer un plaisir qu'elle considère comme coupable, puis à se racheter par un sacrifice sanglant, en faisant lyncher l'homme auquel elle s'est donnée. D'autre part, je dois avouer que, dans l'atmosphère qui règne ici à Paris, il y a une certaine dose de naïveté de la part de certains jeunes Noirs qui viennent tout droit de leurs tribus d'Afrique. Ici, à Paris, on adopte à l'égard des Noirs une attitude toute différente de celle qui est de règle aux Etats-Unis, et il y a de nombreuses femmes qui trouvent parfaitement naturel d'avoir des rapports sexuels avec des Noirs ; et ces jeunes Africains ont souvent l'impression qu'on les distingue pour une œuvre spéciale d'hommage et de courtoisie. J'ai souvent entendu certains d'entre eux se vanter de leurs prouesses dans ce domaine, ce qui est plutôt infantile, et bien des gens ont construit un mythe à partir de ces vantardises, et croient que les Africains sont supérieurs aux Blancs dans ce domaine, ce qui est une pure absurdité, bien entendu. Mais, malheureusement, les Africains croient à cette prétendue supériorité. Mais tout cela en somme, qu'est-ce ? Ce n'est qu'une espèce de compensation pour ce qui leur a été pris au cours de la domination coloniale ; ces gens se disent : "Ils nous ont pris notre langue, ils nous ont pris notre terre, notre culture a été détruite, que nous reste-t-il ? Peut-être une espèce de 'génie' propre à notre race, qui nous donne une supériorité raciale sur ces gens".

### **Comment les Américains blancs et les Noirs américains se comportent-ils les uns envers les autres lorsqu'ils sont à l'étranger ?**

Aux Etats-Unis, nous avons tout un ensemble de conceptions morales et d'habitudes acceptées et ancrées, qui régissent notre attitude les uns envers les autres. Ainsi, par exemple, si un Noir américain se trouve dans un quartier résidentiel blanc d'une ville américaine, il est fort probable que la police ne tardera pas à l'interpeller et à lui demander la raison de sa présence. A cela, le Noir en question répondra qu'il y travaille, qu'il y est appelé pour telle ou telle raison. En d'autres termes, il y a toujours une explication toute prête pour la présence d'un Noir dans une zone blanche. Mais à partir du moment où on met le pied sur le continent européen, tout ce fatras de discrimination et de ségrégation est laissé bien loin derrière soi et c'est pourquoi le Noir et le Blanc américains se contemplent avec une espèce de perplexité troublée ; ils ne savent plus comment se conduire l'un envers l'autre ; les règles toutes faites n'existent plus. Ils ne sont pas assez Espagnols, assez Français, assez Italiens, assez Britanniques pour accepter cette situation nouvelle et se traiter en êtres humains. Et les Américains blancs restent groupés entre eux, formant de petites communautés qui restent à l'écart, tandis que les Noirs pénètrent profondément dans la vie française, vivent avec les Français, dans une fraternité presque totale. Contrairement aux Américains blancs, les Noirs américains sont aisément admis par les Français.

### **Pourquoi cette exception en leur faveur ?**

Même si les Français sont anti-américains, ils reconnaissent instinctivement que l'Américain noir n'est pas leur ennemi, en somme, car ils se rendent compte que ce Noir n'a joué aucun rôle dans les événements politiques qui les touchent. Si un de ceux-ci tombe dans un milieu anti-américain, on lui dit : "Oh ! Mais vous êtes Noir", ce qui veut dire : " Ce n'est pas votre faute ce qui arrive". D'ailleurs, certains Américains ne devraient pas quitter leur pays. Ce n'est somme toute qu'une espèce de malaise psychologique, provenant en partie du fait qu'ils ne savent plus

très bien quels sont les rapports que ce Noir entretient avec les Européens. Ils craignent que cela ne le "gâte" et que, lorsqu'il rentrera aux Etats-Unis, il ne soit plus adaptable, etc., vous comprenez ? Il est véritablement curieux de voir l'espèce de désarroi qui s'empare des Noirs et des Blancs américains quand ils ne sentent plus autour d'eux le cadre familial et rassurant des us et coutumes de là-bas, des attitudes stéréotypées qu'on prend tout naturellement. Par contre, dans les Forces Armées Américaines en France, on retrouve ce vieil équilibre d'outre-Atlantique, car bien qu'il y ait un effort d'intégration dans l'Armée, il y reste quand même assez d'atmosphère américaine pour donner un semblant de "normalité" aux rapports des Blancs et des Noirs américains.



## 2. A Collection of Wright's Poems<sup>213</sup>

### “Everywhere Burning Waters Rise” by Richard Wright (1934)

Everywhere,  
on tall and smokless stackpipes,  
on the empty silos of deserted farms,  
on the rusty blade of the logger's axe,  
on the sooty girders of unfinished skyscrapers,

the cold dense clammy fog  
of discontent is settling. . . .

Everywhere,

on tenemented mountains of hunger,  
in ghetto swamps of suffering,  
in breadlined forests of despair,  
on peonized plains of hopelessness

the red moisture of revolt  
is condensing on the cold stones of human need. . . .

Everywhere,

men are gathering in groups talking, talking, tiny red pools  
are forming;  
hundreds are joining protest parades marching, marching,  
small red rills are trickling;  
thousands are surrounding food-stores storming, storming,  
rising red rivers are flowing  
till on the lowlands of starvation meeting  
and swelling to a roaring torrential tide  
and becoming strangely transformed into waters of fire  
and blazing their way to the foaming sea of revolution. . . .

Sweep on, O red stream of molten anger!  
Surge and seethe like liquid lava  
into every nook and cranny of this greed-reared temple  
and blister the rotting walls with your hot cleansing breath!  
Lick and lap with your tongues of flame  
at its golden pillars of oppressive privilege,

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<sup>213</sup> These are the entire poems that are partly quoted in the text to illustrate Wright's protest writing. We insert them here to permit the reader to understand that right from his very early writing, Wright's language was characterized by protest or non-conformism which was already recognizable in his poems by his Whitmanian free verse style. These poems foreshadowed his future reputation as a protest writer.

lick and lap until they melt,  
melt from the fury of your heat!  
Shower and sprinkle the foul air with sparks of white hate  
and sterilize this hellishly infected floor  
until the last germ of decadence is dead!  
Eat with your fiery teeth  
at the beams and rafters of exploitation,  
eat, eat until they crumble to powdered black ashes!  
Burn and burn and burn quickly!  
Burn,  
For a chafing multitude is waiting,  
is waiting to build on the cleared and conquered grounds!

**Source:**

<http://poetryconnection.weebly.com/everywhere-burning-waters-rise-text.html>  
August 28, 2020]

[Access:

## “I Have Seen Black Hands” by Richard Wright (1935)

I am black and I have seen black hands, millions and millions of them—  
Out of millions of bundles of wool and flannel tiny black fingers have reached restlessly and hungrily for life.  
Reached out for the black nipples at the black breasts of black mothers,  
And they've held red, green, blue, yellow, orange, white, and purple toys in the childish grips of possession,  
And chocolate drops, peppermint sticks, lollipops, wineballs, ice cream cones, and sugared cookies in fingers sticky and gummy,  
And they've held balls and bats and gloves and marbles and jack-knives and sling-shots and spinning tops in the thrill of sport and play  
And pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters and sometimes on New Year's, Easter, Lincoln's Birthday, May Day, a brand new green dollar bill,  
They've held pens and rulers and maps and tablets and books in palms spotted and smeared with ink,  
And they've held dice and cards and half-pint flasks and cue sticks and cigars and cigarettes in the pride of new maturity . . .  
I am black and I have seen black hands, millions and millions of them—  
They were tired and awkward and calloused and grimy and covered with hangnails,  
And they were caught in the fast-moving belts of machines and snagged and smashed and crushed,  
And they jerked up and down at the throbbing machines massing taller and taller the heaps of gold in the banks of bosses,  
And they piled higher and higher the steel, iron, the lumber, wheat, rye, the oats, corn, the cotton, the wool, the oil, the coal, the meat, the fruit, the glass, and the stone until there was too much to be used,  
And they grabbed guns and slung them on their shoulders and marched and groped in trenches and fought and killed and conquered nations who were customers for the goods black hands had made.  
And again black hands stacked goods higher and higher until there was too much to be used,  
And then the black hands held trembling at the factory gates the dreaded lay-off slip,  
And the black hands hung idle and swung empty and grew soft and got weak and bony from unemployment and starvation,  
And they grew nervous and sweaty, and opened and shut in anguish and doubt and hesitation and irresolution . . .  
I am black and I have seen black hands, millions and millions of them—  
Reaching hesitantly out of days of slow death for the goods they had made, but the bosses warned that the goods were private and did not belong to them,  
And the black hands struck desperately out in defence of life and there was blood, but the enraged bosses decreed that this too was wrong,  
And the black hands felt the cold steel bars of the prison they had made, in despair tested their strength and found that they could neither bend nor break them,  
And the black hands fought and scratched and held back but a thousand white hands took them and tied them,  
And the black hands lifted palms in mute and futile supplication to the sodden faces of mobs wild in the revelries of sadism,  
And the black hands strained and clawed and struggled in vain at the noose that tightened about the black throat,

And the black hands waved and beat fearfully at the tall flames that cooked and charred the black flesh . . .

I am black and I have seen black hands

Raised in fists of revolt, side by side with the white fists of white workers,

And some day—and it is only this which sustains me—

Some day there shall be millions and millions of them,

On some red day in a burst of fists on a new horizon!

**Source:**

<https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/i-have-seen-black-hands>. [Access: August 21, 2020]

## “Between the World and Me” by Richard Wright (1935)

And one morning while in the woods I stumbled  
suddenly upon the thing,  
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly  
oaks and elms  
And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting  
themselves between the world and me....  
There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly  
upon a cushion of ashes.  
There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt  
finger accusingly at the sky.  
There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and  
a scorched coil of greasy hemp;  
A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat,  
and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood.  
And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches,  
butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a  
drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;  
Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the  
lingering smell of gasoline.  
And through the morning air the sun poured yellow  
surprise into the eye sockets of the stony skull....  
And while I stood my mind was frozen within cold pity  
for the life that was gone.  
The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by  
icy walls of fear-  
The sun died in the sky; a night wind muttered in the  
grass and fumbled the leaves in the trees; the woods  
poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds; the  
darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the witnesses rose and lived:  
The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves  
into my bones.  
The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into  
my flesh.  
The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars and  
cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared lipstick red  
upon her lips,  
And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that  
my life be burned....  
And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth  
into my throat till I swallowed my own blood.  
My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my  
black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as  
they bound me to the sapling.  
And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from  
me in limp patches.  
And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into  
my raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.  
Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a

baptism of gasoline.

And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like water, boiling my limbs  
Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot  
sides of death.

Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in  
yellow surprise at the sun....

**Source:**

<https://www.blackstarnews.com/education/education/richard-wright-%E2%80%9Cbetween-the-world-and-me%E2%80%9D.html>. [Access: August 21, 2020]

## **“We of the Streets” by Richard Wright (1937)**

Streets are full of the scent of us—odors of onions drifting from doorways, effluvium of baby new-born downstairs, seeping smells of warm soap-suds—the streets are lush with the ferment of our living.

Our sea is water swirling in gutters; our lightning is the blue flame of an acetylene torch; billboards blossom with the colors of a billion flowers; we hear thunder when the “L” roars; our strip of sky is a dirty shirt.

We have grown used to nervous landscapes, chimney-broken horizons, and the sun dying between tenements; we have grown to love streets, the ways of streets; our bodies are hard like worn pavement.

Our emblems are street emblems: stringy curtains blowing in windows; sticky-fingered babies tumbling on door-steps; deep-celled laughs meant for everybody; slow groans heard in area-ways.

Our sunshine is a common hope; our common summer and common winter a common joy and a common sorrow; our fraternity is shoulder-rubbing crude with unspoken love; our password the wry smile that speaks a common fate.

Our love is nurtured by the soft flares of gas-lights; our hate is an icy wind screaming around corners.

And there is something in the streets that made us feel immortality when we rushed along ten thousand strong, hearing our chant fill the world, wanting to do what none of us would do alone, aching to shout the forbidden word, knowing that we of the streets are deathless.

### **Source:**

<https://undocumentedohio.wordpress.com/2012/01/19/we-of-the-streets-by-richard-wright/>  
[Access : August 21, 2020]