PROJECT MUSE®

Social Demarcation and the Forms of Psychological Fracture
in Book One of Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Matthew Elder

Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Volume 52, Number 1,
Spring 2010, pp. 31-47 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tsl.0.0048>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/374956>

Social Demarcation and the Forms of Psychological Fracture in Book One of Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Matthew Elder

One of the most stunning aspects of Frederick Douglass's narrative of his experiences as a slave is his keen insight into the psychology of both the slave and the slave owner. Douglass vividly represents the diabolical psychological manipulation of the slaves by the white masters, but he also shows the figures in his work to be so psychologically damaged by the unnatural and unholy master/slave relationship that the owner in such relationships frequently turns bestial or cruel—even while maintaining a veneer of civility—while the slave obviously suffers a depleted sense of worth and identity; dehumanization is the consequence common to both. Richard Wright's representation of Jim Crow-era Chicago in *Native Son* depicts a society in logical progression from Douglass's slave era. Though slavery was abolished a generation after the publication of Douglass's narrative, the sociological fractures persisted for generations hence, and enslavement was replaced with economic oppression and geographic racial demarcation, which only continued a long period of existential angst initiated by slavery. Wright's Chicago is fractured both sociologically and geographically, a condition that Wright shows results, like slavery, in the dehumanization of both the privileged and the oppressed—both white and black suffer the psychological consequences of an environment schematized by ideas of racial inequity. Wright's central insight in *Native Son*, however, is that the sociological problem and the psychological one take the same form, a dissociation of parts. He sees the individual damage among African-Americans as a psychological fracturing of identity that reflects and necessarily mimics the fractured society that whites work to maintain and blacks are forced to accept.

The lead character of *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, struggles with negotiating the different formulations of his identity, which are thrown into disarray by a segregated, inequitable, and frequently hostile society. The

instability of Bigger's identity is shown to be a product of the psychological disorientation engendered by the environment of racial terror with which he must cope. The tension among the roles he adopts—the neighborhood tough who intimidates with false bravado; the submissive Negro speaking in affected dialect in the presence of whites; and the identity foisted upon him by a paranoid white society, what Angela Davis calls “the myth of the Black rapist” (qtd. by Guttman 170)—and his ostensibly real internal self, which is a nebulous complex of turbulent fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, complicate Bigger's ability to establish any stable identity. Wright is careful to parallel the thematically similar features of psychology and society—the tension and fracture of both—in a series of early scenes, so that readers can connect the one as a consequence of the other and understand accurately the existential and psychological crisis taking place inside Bigger and in society at large. These early scenes demonstrate a careful artistry through which Bigger's problem is identified, and though the novel's philosophy is carried more overtly in Book Two and Book Three, Book One is the most important formally for its masterful staging of the socially deterministic conditions that lead to Bigger's crisis of identity and for its providing a thematic template against which to read the images and events of the rest of the narrative.

The studies addressing the problem of Bigger's identity are many. The conclusions about what his identity is a product of—folk culture, black nationalism, racial strife, and so forth—are varied, but there does seem to be a consensus that Bigger suffers from some sort of schizophrenia and that his multiple personalities are in conflict with one another. Louis Tremaine observes that “Bigger's interactions with others are conditioned by his efforts to meet expectations by conforming to type” (69), and he refers to Bigger's “dissociated sensibility” (64), while Robert James Butler claims that Bigger's “tangled duality has damaged him at the very center of his being” (14). Joko Sengova adds that “Bigger's characterization appears to involve two distinct constructs,” the first of which is “an almost parabolical dossier of multiple personalities” (332). Few critics, however, go so far as to claim that the real problem has become that Bigger's sense of self is so based on artifice that he now has no identity at all—that his identity is only theoretical (at least until Book Three) defined almost entirely by the single emotion of overwhelming, chaotic fear. Sengova does observe, however, that the immovable social barriers faced by Bigger “force him to think he is merely a ‘no man’ and nothing else” (332). Stephen K. George makes note, additionally, of Bigger's statement that in a world of racial oppression, “you [as a black man] ain't a man no more” (qtd. in George 497). The denial specifically of manhood suggested by these passages relates to white society's highly successful effacement of black identity that cast Bigger and the many like him into a prolonged period of existential crisis.

Bigger's lack of a psychological center is interpreted by many as a consequence of the strategies of negation employed by a racist white society. Cynthia Tolentino argues that forcing a repression of identity in blacks was a means of excluding them from the American narrative. She points to the scene of Bigger and Gus observing a plane soaring overhead, pulling the advertisement "Use Speed Gasoline" behind it: "The dialogue that accompanies this image of two young black men passively watching the plane emphasizes their exclusion from a heroic narrative of modernity and progress" (384). In addition, Sondra Guttman claims that the later accusation of rape against Bigger is representative of a device, the "black rapist" myth, for effacing any core black identity by imposing upon black men a most terrifying and stigmatizing label. She goes on to quote Wright's insight in "How Bigger Was Born," that the "rapist" label became "a representative symbol of the Negro's uncertain position in America" (170). The struggle for identity, then, is a feature of oppressed black society at large that, without a clear sense of identity, can never hope to become part of the "heroic narrative" of America and attain its piece of the American promise, which was, at that time, reserved only for whites. Additionally, Elizabeth J. Ciner finds that white society sought to suppress psychological development among blacks by viewing them only as children: "Black males are perpetually 'boys' in the eyes of 'the Man'" (127). Ciner, moreover, observes that "The struggle of the individual for self-possession, which is a struggle to be fully human and free, is the strongest unifying element in Wright's work" (125). As male-ness is so central to Bigger's characterization, Bigger's quest for "self-possession" is, according to Ciner, a quest for manhood (125). Clearly, Bigger, in his existential angst, is intended by Wright as a type for larger black society in the Jim Crow era, and this condition applied to the many who were like Bigger. Wright's artistic achievement in *Native Son* is in representing the psychological consequences of these pernicious devices as being formally similar to the sociological and geographical fractures of the segregated and unstable society. Representing this cultural sickness in the individual Bigger Thomas, Wright adroitly and powerfully identifies the form of the psychological dissociation and vacuity of identity among the urban African-American population.

Bigger's most fundamental and consistent sense of identity is composed almost entirely of, and motivated by, a single emotion brilliantly captured in Wright's title for the novel's first book: "Fear." This study aims to examine how the scenes of the first book are designed so that Bigger's psychological incoherence parallels formally the larger social fractures that are, in large part, responsible for Bigger's existential crisis. Moreover, I hope to demonstrate that, in contrast to Book Three, which, in its integration of the book's moral philosophy, is, as Guttman rightly observes, "clumsily written and unevenly assimilated into the dramatic structure

of the story" (169), Book One achieves a high level of craft and is well designed in its definition of Bigger's problem and its support of the thematic concerns of the narrative as a whole. Finally, the study will, I hope, contribute further to the understanding of the nature of Bigger's psychological disorientation and how that disorientation manifests itself in his actions.

The scene most emblematic of Bigger's troubled sense of identity occurs early, when Bigger, perpetually seeking diversion and a way to "avoid looking so squarely at" the problem of racial inequity, entreats Gus to "play white" with him. The narrative voice informs us that this refers to "a game of play-acting in which he and his friends imitated the ways and manners of white folks" (17). The two commence an improvised dialogue during the first scenario of which Bigger assumes the role of presumably some government official ordering his "general," Gus, to "send your men over the river at dawn and attack the enemy's left flank," and to "attack with tanks, gas, planes and infantry" (18). In the second scenario, Gus takes the role of authority figure, assuming the persona of J. P. Morgan, ordering a subordinate to "sell twenty thousand shares of U.S. Steel in the market this morning" (18). The actions are of enormous and comparable symbolic significance for Bigger and Gus, as the economy and the military represent to them unassailable institutions of oppression. Significantly, in these fantasies, both characters have their go at playing authority figures. The topics of the scenarios envisioned by Bigger and Gus cannot be far removed from their conditioned understanding of the racial inequities they have been raised in awareness of. The general would certainly represent a uniformed authority with which the black would have had a much different relationship than the white. For Bigger and Gus, being black, and even more so because they are admitted thieves, the uniform, and the militant authority it represents would have been a constantly lurking and fearsome presence. Contrast this with the white understanding of that presence, which was as a protective barrier preventing any encroachment into white society by black skin, which, to white society, was a lurking and fearsome prospect, made all the more terrifying, especially to white women, by the promulgation of the "black rapist" myth. The second authority is also an emblem of the larger authority that perpetuates the oppression of blacks. J. P. Morgan is understood by Bigger and Gus as representative of an economy calculated to prevent any social mobility in black society. African-Americans would have no access to the stock market, which is as far away, elusive, and almost mythic as the airplane the military will never let Bigger fly.

Interestingly, the subordinate in both scenarios integrates the dialect of Negro submissiveness, responding "yessuh" to the authority's directives, making of these scenarios, which are peopled only with imagined whites, simulations of white/black conflict in which the white is invariably the

authority. The scene follows about a page after Gus mocks Bigger's claims that he could fly a plane given the chance: "Gus pulled down the corners of his lips, stepped out from the wall, squared his shoulders, doffed his cap, bowed low and spoke with mock deference: 'yessuh'" (16–17). The varied discursive conventions, those of blacks in black society, those of blacks in white society, and those of whites in white society, are compiled in these scenarios but the significance is in the unsettling realization that they are all part of a theatrical performance by single characters who move among the conventions at will. Wright presents in this scene a microcosm of the environments and roles that blacks were forced to navigate. In the last scenario imagined by the two, Bigger acts as the president of the United States ordering Gus, as the secretary of state, to appear at an urgent cabinet meeting. Having identified two institutions that they see as implements in the oppression of blacks, they now imagine the oppression as more literal and direct. The purpose for the cabinet meeting is that "the niggers is raising sand all over the country," and "we've got to do something with these black folks" (19). The crossing of discourses is also evident in the characters' appropriation of the symbolically significant "nigger" epithet, calling each other by that term, usually when a companion is behaving unfavorably, demonstrating fear or irrationality. As the white president, the ultimate institutional authority, uses the term, so does Gus, for example, upbraid Bigger with "Nigger, you nuts" in response to Bigger's expressing his dreams of flying.

This scene doesn't represent identity confusion so much as simply the psychological pressure of existing in an environment that demands the artificial adoption of so many different roles. The different sets of discursive conventions appropriate to the varying roles become symbolic of those roles, but they also, since Bigger is forced to adopt the conventions, add considerable strain to his psyche when he must conform to them in the right situations, or when situations confound his ability to adopt the correct roles. This early scene provides a sort of index of the complex of roles that Bigger finds himself forced to negotiate. Though the aim of this study is not to determine why Bigger kills, and I don't mean to claim that his psychological turmoil is necessarily the sole cause of his crimes; he is our case study of psychological disorientation and is representative of the psychological damage endured by those existing in such a conflicted society. Indeed, all the characters, the white ones included, evince psychological disorientation, if not damage, from being forced to cope with society's fractures. The scene ends with an eruption of the frustration about racial inequities that are constantly bearing on them economically and psychologically. After the final improvised scenario, the exchange between Bigger and Gus indicates there is no diversion from the constant pressure of racial inequity:

Bigger sighed and swore.

"Goddammit!"

"What's the matter?"

"They don't let us do *nothing*."

"Who?"

"The *white* folks." (19)

This scene, of a joking tone for the most part until the concluding expression of frustration, represents, according to Sengova, the emotion to which Bigger and those like him are driven by their socioeconomic circumstances: "loathing intensely the citadel of power, including its putative population, its values, and other symbols that identify it" (332). The tension that overflows here will become a familiar one. It is a low-consequence preamble of the more volatile tensions that erupt later when a more real and sustained conflict of identities occurs.

Scenes like the one with Gus and Bigger playacting and other early ones are, according to some critics, typical among African-Americans, males especially, who are struggling to cope with a society of racial oppression. Aime J. Ellis, in examining the function of black male community in *Native Son*, claims that the social grouping among poor urban black males was a strategy meant to ease psychological anxiety and to make "sense of a world filled with racial terror" (24). Ellis describes it as "a defiantly oppositional black male subculture that not only sought to ensure [Bigger's] survival but also struggled to preserve his humanity" (24). Clearly we see the understanding of shared experience among the members of Bigger's social group, and it provides them with a feeling of security in their hostile society. However, though Ellis argues that this sense of community was a stabilizing force for Bigger, I find that Bigger's relationship to his chums is in reality a difficult one that only complicates his efforts to keep his inner and outer selves in harmony. Though all African-Americans in Chicago's "Black Belt" would have been forced to modulate their discourse in the presence of whites, Bigger, and his friends to a lesser degree, have the added pressure of maintaining a reputation that facilitates their survival in the Black Belt. For Bigger, the machismo he projects as part of his established reputation conflicts severely with what is, in reality, his fearful and anxious state of mind.

It becomes evident early on that Bigger is not the assured neighborhood tough that he represents himself to be. Indeed, even Bigger seems confused by the disjunction between his outward aggression and his inner fear and anxiety. For the most part, Bigger seems to be a companionable fellow until some psychological tension motivates him to project a more aggressive identity. We learn that the group of friends has engaged in petty theft before, but now Bigger hankers for something more consequential. He wants, this time, to use a gun to rob "Old Blum's." This in itself is an

indication of his growing aggression and perhaps his desire to replace his inner fear and submissiveness around whites with self-assertion in a quest for humanization. Notably, Blum is white, so the action Bigger contemplates deeply conflicts with his almost Pavlovian change of character around whites. After Bigger raises the prospect of the heist, Jack and G.H. equivocate, but sign on fairly readily. Gus, however, hesitates and Bigger must pressure him. True to his reputation, Bigger hurls profanity-laden insults at Gus until he finally intimidates Gus into joining in the scheme. Bigger, however, has caused for himself an emotional paradox: "[...] Bigger felt a curious sensation—half-sensual, half-thoughtful. He was divided and pulled against himself" (25). Bigger feels he must go through with the robbery but simultaneously dreads the prospect of having to go through with it: "Even though Bigger had asked Gus to be with him in the robbery, the fear that Gus would really go made the muscles of Bigger's stomach tighten: he was hot all over" (25). The enormous psychological tension caused by the drive to commit the crime and the fear of doing it is further complicated by his having physically and emotionally to threaten Gus, which conflicts with his inner fear and psychic delicacy. Wright does not force us to speculate here; the text vividly describes to us Bigger's anxiety and tells us directly that Bigger is not nearly as self-assured as he represents himself to be. The scene is a natural progression from the earlier one of Bigger and Gus. Now the tension is greater and the stakes higher, which is clearly part of Wright's design.

Bigger's multiple identities converge in this scene as he tries to negotiate the contradicting impulses. As his outward aggression battles his inner anxiety, a third identity, that of submissive deferral to whites, pushes the tension to a level nigh unbearable. Bigger's fear of and automatic outward submissiveness toward whites represent a psychological barrier against which are arrayed both his social bravado and his very real need to express some inexplicable aggression. The text captures the force of the tension in a grim analogy that foreshadows the calamitous events ahead: "Like a man about to shoot himself and dreading to shoot and yet knowing that he has to shoot and feeling it all at once and powerfully, he watched Gus and waited for him to say yes" (25). The dangerous psychological tension built in Bigger in this scene, a "hysterical tensivity," (26) will turn fatal when similar, even more powerful tensions afflict him later in the text. Toward Gus, who hesitates, Bigger feels a "hot hate and fear," and the mingling of his various roles confuses Bigger as he transfers "his fear of the whites to Gus" (25), as well as, it would appear, his self-hatred, for Gus represents so much fear and anxiety that Bigger wishes to suppress: "He hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, even as he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery" (25). Bigger, clearly, is unable fully to

mask his inner fear, however. Gus, finally relenting and agreeing to participate in the robbery, says angrily to Bigger, "I'll help just like I always help. But I'll be Goddamn if I'm taking orders from *you*, Bigger! You just a scared coward! You calling me scared so nobody'll see how scared *you* is!" (27). This truth stings Bigger and the psychological tension that had been growing nearly erupts in violence as Bigger lunges at Gus. Jack and G. H. intervene to prevent further violence, but the scene, as each scene of Wright's careful structure does, prefigures more cataclysmic events that are to follow.

When the group meets later in the day to execute their plan, the pressure has become too much for Bigger and his fear overwhelms his force of will. Instead of proceeding with the robbery, he concocts a scheme to avoid it. Bigger assaults Gus, ostensibly because Gus is late to the meeting, knowing this will cause Gus to quit the plan. For the moment at least, Bigger is able to relieve some of the psychological tension caused by the forced communication of conflicting identities. Such relief, necessitated often through the novel, is, in a thematic motif of Wright's, usually achieved by Bigger through some manner of sexual release. He masturbates in a theater shortly after the playacting scene and his early argument with Gus, while later he seeks intercourse with Bessie to relieve the tensions of his interactions with the Dalton family. When Bigger attacks Gus in order to avoid going ahead with the robbery, the fight is described in vividly sexualized language. Bigger forces Gus to the floor and brandishes a clearly phallic weapon at him:

[. . .] Bigger was on top of him, with the knife open and ready.

"Get up! Get up and I'll slice your tonsils!"

Gus lay still.

[. . .]

"Get up!" he said.

"Please, Bigger!"

"You want me to slice you?"

He stooped again and placed the knife at Gus's throat. Gus did not move and his large black eyes looked pleadingly. Bigger was not satisfied; he felt his muscles tightening again.

"Get up! I ain't going to ask you no more!"

Slowly, Gus stood. Bigger held the open blade an inch from Gus's lips.

"Lick it," Bigger said, his body tingling with elation.

[. . .]

"Say, Bigger, ain't you scared 'im enough?" Doc asked.

Bigger did not answer. His eyes gleamed hard again, pregnant with another idea.

"Put your hands up, way up!" he said.

Gus swallowed and stretched his hands high along the wall.

[. . .]

He put the tip of the blade into Gus's shirt and then made an arc with his arm, as though cutting a circle.

"How would you like me to cut your belly button out?"

Gus did not answer. Sweat trickled down his temples. His lips hung wide, loose.

"Shut them liver lips of yours!"

Gus did not move a muscle. Bigger pushed the knife harder into Gus's stomach.

"Bigger!" Gus said in a tense whisper.

"Shut your mouth!" (38–39)

The figurative rape of Gus parallels the contemplated rape of Mary Dalton and the later rape and savage murder of Bessie Mears after the tensions have finally overwhelmed Bigger and he can manage them no longer. The term "rape" will take on multiple significances as the novel progresses, and our interpretation of its thematic import may in fact be central to our understanding of the novel's message. It also, as we shall see, bears a unique relation to each of the roles Bigger finds himself forced to negotiate. Here, before the rape has reached the full literal manifestation that it later will with Bessie, it is a result of the forced collision of his anxiety-ridden, fearful, masculine-aggressive bullying, and timid, white-fearing selves. The conflicts are only sketched out in these early events, but they become more tangible as Bigger moves into white society and we witness the unsettling change in his demeanor and discourse. Far from being an environment of reassurance and support, the black community, though filled with people of similar circumstance and shared experience, is for Bigger only another stage for which he must devise a role in order to survive.

Though Bigger's tension erupts in the violence against and figurative rape of Gus, more calamitous effects are, for the time being, averted because of the violent/sexual release he finds in the abuse of Gus. The descriptions of the scene employ some key verbal signals that allow us to connect the thematic significance of this scene to other events in the book. Bigger's tightening muscles are a symptom of the tension resulting from the conflict of his different selves. We saw the same tightening a few pages earlier when Bigger threatened Gus in order to intimidate him into participating in the robbery. Bigger's muscles remain tense until he is "satisfied." Clearly the satisfaction he requires is not too different from that he seeks from Bessie after his interactions with the Daltons. The signals help us to locate the source of Bigger's psychological turmoil and to connect the grievous effects of that turmoil directly to it. The lines that conclude these opening scenes indicate to us that the scenes can be used to help understand the significance of all

that follows: "That was the way he lived; he passed his days trying to defeat or gratify powerful impulses in a world he feared" (42). Wright works out a codex in Book One that defines Bigger's tensions and provides a reference source for the causes of his later actions. Social and psychological conditions are carefully paralleled, and each scene is an intensification of earlier ones and a prefiguring of later ones.

After the suspenseful morning with his friends, Bigger prepares nervously for his trek into the white neighborhood, deeply cognitive of the racial inequity with which he will be forced to cope. "He was going among white people," the text reads, "so he would take his knife and his gun," the symbol of phallic authority he wielded against Gus and the one he could not bring himself to wield against Blum. It would, according to the text, "make him feel that he was the equal of them, give him a sense of completeness" (43), suggesting he is aware of the difficulty that lies ahead in reconciling the identity he would be forced to adopt at the Dalton house with that of his life in the Black Belt. What the passage really suggests is that his secret possession of the knife and the gun would, in the face of the degrading submissive behavior he was forced into, symbolize his groping for manhood and narrow the gulf between his proud, boastful identity in his neighborhood and his demure, prideless identity in white society.

When Bigger arrives at the Dalton house, we are presented with a character nearly unrecognizable as Bigger. This Bigger is one of retiring silence and "yessuhs" and "nawsuhs." The change, though not unexpected, is unsettling nonetheless and all the more striking here because these scenes are proximately juxtaposed with the vivid scenes of Bigger's volatile aggression and reckless bravado. He speaks the simpleton dialect expected of him and appropriate to the role that white society has circumscribed for him: "There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence" (48). Here we see a powerful example of the way the fractured psyche reflects the fractured society. The black, forced into a disorienting existential dilemma cannot but suffer some psychological damage from having to create a false identity and suppress those character traits proscribed by the white majority, while the white, even one who purports to champion civil rights, is utterly naïve to the black's dilemma and knows no other way to expect him to be; he is either the right and natural timid black or the deranged thief and rapist of white women. Dalton, to his mind, must discover which he has and asks Bigger if he would steal, to which Bigger is degradingly forced to respond, "Oh, nawsuhs. I don't steal," which, of course, is a lie, a telling point of disjunction between his white-society persona and his Black Belt identity.

The textually significant description of Bigger's understanding of white expectations as "organic" refers to the rigid truth that the conditioned projection of artifice has entirely displaced any normal psychological

development and formulation of identity. Here and later the term is used to signify not the healthy psychology it would suggest, but rather the ability to conjure artificial constructs of identity and project them as needed—the *process*, not the *identity*, is what is organic for Bigger because it has become automatic, and Bigger is exceedingly skillful at the process. In using this term ironically, though, Wright is also working out an expression of the psychological paradox of being forced to understand oneself as both being and not-being—that is, having consciousness but being formulated as a nonhuman, a “no man,” by the powers that invent and regulate social identity. In the environment of social and economic determinism in which Wright shows Bigger to exist, he is a victim of mighty and intractable external forces, and as such, even the artifice of his staged roles cannot be otherwise than “organic.” This essential paradox lies at the source of Bigger’s existential dilemma. The paradox of Bigger’s consciousness being both organic and artificial accounts for the earlier dilemma in which Bigger “felt divided and pulled against himself.” In an emotional paradox, he knew he must and yet could not act in the robbery of Blum’s, a sort of tension that can lead only to catastrophe.

The conflict between what might be called Bigger’s circumscribed and proscribed identities is evident in his interview with Mr. Dalton and his interactions with the other members of the household. The submissive and demure tone of his discourse with the Dalton family belies the ominous resentful and profanity-laden interior monologue that takes place while he speaks with Mr. Dalton, Mary, and Peggy. We can feel the growing tension engendered by this unnatural discursive dialectic in Bigger signified by the pulsing repetition of his frustrated swear “Goddamn!” Of course, no one is completely the person inside he represents himself to be to others, but the distance and disjunction between the inner and outer selves evinced by Bigger Thomas is such as would be considered unnatural, and, indeed, sociopathic in modern society, a time in which some social healing has occurred. The language of Bigger’s inner thoughts in no way resembles the retiring tone of his affected dialect with the white characters. His dual identities are in constant conflict, and when he finally is in his room, out of the company of the whites, he relieves the tension in an act that has vaguely erotic overtones: “He lit a cigarette and stretched himself full length upon the bed. Ohhhh . . .” (59).

The next scenes are the climactic representations in Book One of the problem of identity that afflicts Bigger. Mary and Jan, perhaps well-meaning, but more naïve even than the smug and self-congratulatory Mr. Dalton, have no idea of the true plight of African-Americans, which they view as chiefly economic. In their naïve dismissal of blackness as an identity, they, according to Addison Gayle, view Bigger not as a human but as a social experiment, and hence are, in their way, complicit in society’s effacement of black identity. As Gayle explains, members of the Communist

party like Jan Erlone, "believing that they were able to look beyond race and color, succeeded not in regarding all as equal but in regarding blacks as fantasies, images culled from the imagination" (117). Mary and Jan, Gayle goes on to claim, were just as blind to him as the Dalton family and the rest of white society. Their attempts to abolish race distinction in such an environment, rather than humanizing Bigger, make him "feel like a dog" (350). As such, they unwittingly lead him into a state of catastrophic psychological tension in which the forced communication among his multiple, ultimately irreconcilable identities causes Bigger extreme disorientation and produces calamitous results.

Mary's first directive to Bigger forces him into action that conflicts with his white-society persona. He must, in picking up Jan, do something of which Mr. Dalton would certainly disapprove, and more, he must keep it a secret. When Mary and Jan converse with Bigger, they pressure him to disregard the identity he has developed for interacting with white people, which is immediately confusing to Bigger and causes his initial tension because he has no understanding of how to behave in such a situation. As before when his identities were in conflict, "Bigger's entire body tightened with suspense and dread" (66). The tightening and the dread, as verbal motifs, should help us link this situation with the earlier one of Bigger confronting Gus. Jan makes Bigger let him drive and Bigger is forced out of a role he knows how to manage; his inner thoughts begin to seethe with the same violent tone as when Bigger intimidated Gus and when he spoke with Mr. Dalton. He resents Mary and Jan because they force his identities into confusion: "At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate" (67). Bigger is further disoriented when Jan commands him, "Don't say *sir* to me. . . . I don't like it" (70). "How on earth," Bigger thinks, "could he learn not to say *yessuh* and *yessum* to white people in one night when he had been saying it all his life long?" (73). The command is grammatically imperative, which on its own is confusing enough considering it is an order to disregard racial barriers.

After the three park the car outside Ernie's Kitchen Shack, Bigger thinks momentarily that he will have a chance to rest while Mary and Jan are eating. Mary and Jan, completely oblivious that they are causing Bigger even greater terror than he normally experiences rather than comforting him with a gesture of racial equality, cajole him into joining them in the restaurant. Bigger is keenly aware of the dilemma this presents: "The people in Ernie's Kitchen Shack knew him and he did not want them to see him with these white people. He knew that if he went in they would ask one another: *Who're them white folks Bigger's hanging around with?*" (71). In this place Bigger cannot segregate his identities, which are naturally antagonistic toward one another. Jack greets Bigger in the restaurant, but

Bigger cannot display his defensive bravado to Jack while his submissiveness to whites is in effect with Mary and Jan present, a mode that has already been frustrated by Mary's and Jan's naïve misunderstanding of Bigger's true plight. To make matters worse, Bessie, Bigger's sometime girlfriend, also greets him, but Bigger is nearly paralyzed by his inability to determine an appropriate identity to project. Those identities so in conflict with one another are again forced into communication here, in a scene that is a progression of those that have come before and that have prefigured the tension of a situation such as this. Bigger's ability to project the right role at the right time is automatic, described by Wright with a term, "organic," that is a key verbal cue guiding us in connecting all these scenes together. In an action of symbolic significance, "Bigger picked up a piece of chicken and bit it. When he tried to chew he found his mouth dry. It seemed that the very organic functions of his body had altered" (73). Bigger's ability to alternate among identities, as revealed in the scene with Mr. Dalton, is an "organic" operation, which refers not to a fundamental, a "natural" identity, but rather ironically to the tragic adroitness in projecting artifice that Bigger has developed. Mary's and Jan's interference with that process disrupts Bigger's psychological functioning, which is paralleled by the disruption of Bigger's physiological functions. The result, once again, is anger, fear, tension, and hatred. But after the implied narrator reveals that to us, Bigger's interior monologue goes mostly silent, as if the extreme tension arising from the forced communication of his separate personalities, as well as Mary's and Jan's denying him one role he can comfortably manage, obliterates any sense even of artificial identity; literally he is a "no man."

As the three sit in the restaurant, there are some awkward attempts by Jan and Mary to integrate themselves into the black culture they have stepped into. Jan, the revolutionary and transgressor of social boundaries, inquires of Bigger, "You like fried chicken?" but it is an assumption more than a question. Jan later attempts to appropriate some dialect or colloquialisms presumably to experiment with breaking the racial boundaries that separate him from them: "'You got something there,' Jan said, looking at Bigger. 'Did I say that right, Bigger?'" (73). Even the good faith which may be intended by such remarks is perhaps negated by the casual tossing off of expressions like "your people" that characterize Jan's inability to understand the problem. While riding in the car later, Mary effusively declares her affection for the "emotion" of Bigger's people. She sings a spiritual of which she seems especially to approve, complete with Negro dialect:

*"Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' fer to carry me home. . . ." (77)*

These instances seem intended to parallel the earlier scenes of Bigger's and Gus's playacting in which they imitated, as best they knew, the tone and content of white discourse, and the attempts are no less awkward or more genuine than Bigger's and Gus's imaginings. Wright's formal design with that parallel concludes the series of scenes meant to depict for us the circumstances of Bigger's psychological disorientation and to parse Bigger's several identities.

The final bit of the novel's meticulously crafted first book introduces a concept of enormous thematic importance and one that is, in its reiteration and transformation in books Two and Three of the novel, a clever, formally significant choice. After leaving the restaurant, Mary, Jan, and Bigger cruise in the car for several hours while Bigger, driving, is largely silent. When they arrive at the Dalton house finally, Mary prods Bigger to speak and his reaction is one with which we have become familiar: "He tightened with hate" (81). As Bigger helps the intoxicated Mary up the stairs, the text emphasizes his hate for her, and the ominous swear "Goddamn!" returns as a signal of Bigger's psychological tension and, since Bigger must catch Mary and carry her, his hands pressing against her breasts, his sexual tension. Finally they reach Mary's bed and Bigger's tension reaches a peak of psychological and sexual frisson. As with Gus, a situation not intended to be sexual is sexualized:

He eased his hand, the fingers spread wide, up the center of her back and her face came toward him and her lips touched his, like something he had imagined. He stood her on her feet and she swayed against him. He tightened his arms as his lips pressed tightly against hers and he felt her body moving strongly. The thought and conviction that Jan had had her a lot flashed through his mind. He kissed her again and felt the sharp bones of her hips move in a hard and veritable grind. Her mouth was open and her breath came slow and deep. (84)

Clearly, this scene is meant to parallel the earlier one with Gus. The text suggests to us that Bigger contemplates raping Mary:

He lifted her and laid her on the bed. Something urged him to leave at once, but he leaned over her, excited, looking at her face in the dim light, not wanting to take his hands from her breasts. She tossed and mumbled sleepily. He tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him. He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. (84–85)

The potential rape is interrupted by Mrs. Dalton, who enters the room looking for Mary, but we may also wonder if the rape is also prevented by

Bigger's inability to act beyond the behavior circumscribed by the conditioned submissiveness that emerges in the presence of whites, as the case was with the aborted robbery of Old Blum, the phallic nature of the gun suggesting a link between the two situations. Again, the action is aborted and an alternate violence substituted in its place. Bigger smothers Mary with a pillow and inadvertently kills her while trying to keep her quiet as Mrs. Dalton calls out for her. Reflecting on the text, though, we are forced to wonder how inadvertent the killing was considering Bigger's feelings of intense hatred and his earlier threats against Gus's life.

Again, my aim is not to determine exactly what causes Bigger to kill Mary, and certainly not to claim that the only reason for it was the overflow of tension caused by the conflict of identities, though I do think the events are closely related. I'm more interested in examining the formal significance of this scene, coming as it does at the end of the first book, and how it is used further to develop the significance of the fracturing of Bigger's identities that has been consciously developed in the scenes leading up to the climax of Book One. Introduction of the concept of rape in Book One is a powerful device for mediating the theme of Bigger's multiple identities, as the different thematic formulations of rape through Book Two and Book Three illuminate his different selves and help to explain how those selves are defined.

The early figurative rape of Gus is the instance of rape invested with the most symbolic significance. It seems to encapsulate all the motives of Bigger's various selves and express them in a scene that is a compilation of the formulations of rape at the end of Book One and throughout the second two books. No rape of Mary Dalton occurs, but the contemplation of it and the possibility of it establish the presence of the rape theme in that scene. The important factor, indeed, is that Bigger does *not* commit rape. The contemplated rape is representative of the fearful and anxious Bigger that he keeps suppressed, hidden from others. The emotions motivating Bigger throughout Book One are fully captured by the section's apt title. His whole being is afflicted by deep and growing fear that in many ways is undefined, but clearly is a product of the environment of racial segregation and terror and geographic fracture. As the aborted robbery and subsequent figurative rape of Gus were a result of Bigger's fear of whites, so may be the averted rape and subsequent murder of Mary. In Book Two the rape concept reaches its full literal manifestation in Bigger's rape and brutal murder of Bessie. This representation of rape is connected with the assured and decisive but volatile identity that Bigger projects to his acquaintances in the Black Belt. After bullying Bessie into accompanying him on the lam, Bigger's psyche is overloaded with tension, which he relieves by raping Bessie in an abandoned building. Subsequently Bigger murders her by bashing her head in with a brick, mirroring the threat on Gus's life and the killing of Mary.

The similarities should be enough to convince us that there is a clear thematic link among the three events.

Book Three treats the theme more abstractly. The myth of the black rapist that is so deeply embedded in the social consciousness of whites motivates authorities to charge Bigger automatically with raping Mary Dalton in addition to murdering her even though a rape never took place. If we are looking to find Bigger's true identity, the novel presses us to consider whether identity consists in how one is perceived by others. We have an interpretive dilemma here because technically Bigger is a rapist, but he is not the rapist white society charges him with being, so is he indeed finally the "black rapist" that society fears him to be? It is a valid question to ask, in studying this text especially, whether we finally are what were are perceived to be. After all, Bigger is to be executed for being a rapist of a white woman; his very life depends on that identity. As with the other figurations of rape in the text, this one ends with a killing, that of Bigger himself. This rape, imagined as it is, is associated with the identity of Bigger's imposed upon him by white society. Clearly, Wright has consciously varied his treatment of rape across the three books to encourage us to consider its varied significances. As a formal design, the narrative divisions between the books, in addition to other purposes, reflect the fractured identities mediated by the different representations of rape.

There is also in this final iteration of the theme the implicit suggestion of the rape of Bigger himself by a society that abuses, oppresses, and exploits him, socially and economically. Bigger has suffered the rape of his economic livelihood by the tradition of racial segregation into which he was born. Economic exploitation is embodied by the deluded Mr. Dalton, who owns some of the crumbling apartment buildings in which Bigger and the Black Belt population have no choice but to reside, and who thinks black suffering can be alleviated by the donation of ping-pong tables. More important, however, is the rape of Bigger's spirit, which has depleted his sense of self-worth and individual identity. Importantly, the formulation of a rape theme occurs at the climax of Book One because the events in Mary's room and immediately after are the culmination of a narrative whose events grow in the severity of their circumstances as Bigger's psychological tension grows.

An analysis of the formal effectiveness of Book One of *Native Son* will necessarily be a thematic reading as well because of what appears to be Wright's observation that psychological fracture both mimics and is a result of social fracture, a situation that lends itself well to literary representation. That being the case, I hope that a formal reading of the novel in this way contributes some to the understanding of Bigger's identity, which has been studied at length by scholars. Of course, my claim that the thematic and formal structures are interwoven in this way is a prod-

uct of my interpretation of the nature of Bigger's psychological affliction. For all the fine readings that have been made of Bigger's complex psychology and severely disturbed sense of identity, the notion that Bigger in fact has no identity at all in Book One that is not artificial merits ongoing critical attention. *Native Son*, though not without flaws, does, in Book One, give an effective and singularly rich treatment of the psychological difficulties and angst that arise from the tradition of segregation and racial prejudice, for which reason the novel will no doubt be a source of continued study.

University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia

WORKS CITED

- Butler, Robert James. "The Function of Violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." *Black American Literature Forum* 20 (1986): 9–25.
- Ciner, Elizabeth J. "Richard Wright's Struggles with Fathers." *Richard Wright: Myths and Realities*. Ed. C. James Trotman. New York: Garland Publishing, 1988. 125–36.
- Dawahare, Anthony. "From No Man's Land to Mother-Land: Emasculation and Nationalism in Richard Wright's Depression Era Urban Novels." *African American Review* 33.3 (1999): 451–66.
- Ellis, Aime J. "Where is Bigger's Humanity?: Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." *ANQ* 15.3 (2002): 23–30.
- Fabre, Michel. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993.
- Gayle, Addison. *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press. 1980.
- George, Stephen K. "The Horror of Bigger Thomas: The Perception of Form Without Face in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." *African American Review* 31.1 (1997): 497.
- Guttman, Sondra. "What Bigger Killed For: Rereading Violence Against Women in *Native Son*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43.2 (2001): 169–93.
- Fishburn, Katherine. "The Delinquent's Sabbath; Or, The Return of the Repressed: The Matter of Bodies in *Native Son*." *Studies in the Novel* 31.2 (1999): 202–21.
- Karem, Jeff. "'I Could Never Really Leave the South': Regionalism and the Transformation of Richard Wright's 'American Hunger.'" *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001): 694–715.
- Mechling, Jay. "The Failure of Folklore in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*." *The Journal of American Folklore* 104.413 (1991) 275–94.
- Sengova, Joko. "Native Identity and Alienation in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Cross-Cultural Analysis." *Mississippi Quarterly* 50.2 (1997): 327.
- Tolentino, Cynthia. "The Road Out of the Black Belt: Sociology's Fictions and Black Subjectivity in *Native Son*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 33.3 (2000): 377–405.
- Tremaine, Louis. "The Dissociated Sensibility of Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son*." *Studies in American Fiction* 14 (1986): 63–76.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1993.