Publishing Blackness

Young, John, Hutchinson, George

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“QUITE AS HUMAN AS IT IS NEGRO”

Subpersons and Textual Property in 
Native Son and Black Boy

For fifty-one years, everyone read the wrong version of Native Son. Black Boy met a similar fate for thirty-two years, though readers could have stitched together the clues to that textual mystery, if they were especially determined. The only publicly available versions of these works, which continue to define Richard Wright’s career, were those he revised at the request of the Book-of-the-Month Club and his influential editor at Harper & Brothers. American Hunger, originally the second half of Wright’s autobiography, finally appeared on its own in 1977 (though sections had been serialized in 1944 and 1945, surrounding Black Boy’s original publication in the last year of the war), while the original version of Native Son remained invisible until Arnold Rampersad used it as copytext for his 1991 Library of America edition of Wright’s Later Works. HarperCollins, the current instantiation of Wright’s original publisher, now issues both the “Abridged” and “Restored” editions of Native Son, along with the “Restored” Black Boy, with revisions for the first editions now relegated to notes. While the rhetorical marker of a “Restored” edition bestows agency on the editor’s recovery of a lost original, the “Abridged” designation elides the Book Club’s consistent muting of Wright’s sexual and political content, as if the manuscripts had simply run long.¹

Those scholars subscribing to an intentionalist editorial theory will surely prefer the “Restored” editions. No record survives of Wright’s response to changing Native Son, but he clearly resisted cutting the second half of American Hunger and then adjusting its conclusion (and title) accordingly, despite numerous efforts to make those revisions satisfactory to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, the renowned novelist who was also a prominent Book Club judge, and someone considered “sympathetic
to the Negro cause” by the standards of the day. In any case, Wright’s acquiescence to the Book-of-the-Month Club, one of the most powerful agents of literary promotion in the 1940s, represents from an intentionalist perspective a choice between tremendous commercial success and individual authenticity. The need for an intentionalist restoration is especially poignant in the case of these landmark works of African American literature, as Wright’s testimony to the material realities of racialized life in Chicago and the South is refracted, as if by iodine, through the white sphere of literary production.

On the other hand, the original published editions of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* would hold greater historical weight for a materialist editorial approach, precisely for what they reveal about the social circumstances of production. By reading the “Abridged” versions of these works, we can see what kinds of images of black male sexuality, for example, could be published and marketed on a mass scale in the early 1940s United States: Wright’s compromises and the resulting texts speak more eloquently than their original versions to the dilemma that James Weldon Johnson famously called “a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience.”

John Bryant usefully summarizes the divergent orientations of these editorial theories: “the two differ in their historicisms, the one seeking a private past, the other a public past. Both isolate crucial components of a culture: the inner workings of creative originating mind(s) to construct a text of the work; the interactions of texts and readers in a social sphere.” The compromise Bryant proposes, a theory of textuality as fluid, seeks to bridge this divide by bringing both “private” and “public” versions of a work together on a page or screen, so that readers may appreciate fluid texts as “the material evidence of shifting intentions” (9; original emphasis). Similarly, Peter Shillingsburg finds that while a work (understood as an immaterial collection of material texts) does not reside in any single document or version, “[e]ach version implies the work in a different way; in juxtaposition, the versions imply the work in a more complex way.”

Like Bryant and Shillingsburg, I would rather read both versions of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* in juxtaposition than adjudicate between them for a “correct” or “definitive” edition. (In practice, I have ordered both editions of the novel from the campus bookstore, so that two halves of a modern fiction course can gradually discover how each *Native Son* interacts with the other.) Indeed, I would argue that such a “both/and” editorial method is especially appropriate for most African American modernist literature, as the ostensibly private sphere of authorial compo-
sition and revision has already been rendered troublingly public through Du Bois’s double consciousness. *Native Son* is hardly the first text to be revised before publication in accordance with the marketing pressures of more culturally conservative readers, but the category of race—as produced historically in terms that conjoin ideology and aesthetics—puts particular pressure on conventional notions of the public/private distinction between manuscript and print. Because the public sphere of literary reception is largely defined through what the philosopher Paul Taylor terms “thick racialism, which holds that the physical differences between races are signs of deeper, typically intellectual and moral, differences,” the assumed autonomy of the private sphere of composition and revision is compromised by the need to produce a textual self in accordance with (or in opposition to) thick racialist aesthetics.⁵

The interesting and productive question is then not which version of *Native Son* or *Black Boy* to privilege but rather how to read their manuscript and published editions in mutual relation, for what they reveal about both Wright’s authorial choices and the social spheres circumscribing them. In his 1937 essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright laments that African American texts of this period could function only as either “a sort of conspicuous ornamentation” or “the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice.”⁶ At the level of narrative content, both *Native Son* and *Black Boy* reject this false dilemma, condemning the entire racist structure of midcentury American society rather than pleading for justice from it. At the same time, the rhetorical effects of both works’ revision and marketing reinforce the dichotomy Wright interrogates in “Blueprint.” Whereas the narrative voice in each text implies an authorial position well beyond the unspoken publishing premise that “all non Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes,” as Zora Neale Hurston opined ten years after *Native Son*, in “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” the revised implied author of *Black Boy* and the advertised author of *Native Son* bracket off cultural complications from their marketing images.⁷ In this interaction of versions, between Wright’s compositional and publishing decisions, and between each text’s linguistic and bibliographic contents, lies the real story of *Native Son* and *Black Boy.*

I. “A bit on the raw side”: Revised Sexuality in *Native Son*

By August 1939, Wright had completed a year of intensive composition and revision for his first novel, with publication scheduled for the fall.
Harper & Bros. sent a bound set of page proofs, intended as a reviewer’s copy, to the Book-of-the-Month Club judges committee instead, with word quickly returning of their interest. By August 22, Wright’s editor, Edward Aswell, wrote:

And incidentally the Book Club wants to know whether, if they do choose Native Son, you would be willing to make some changes in that scene early in the book where Bigger and his friends are sitting in the moving picture theatre. I think you will recognize the scene I mean and will understand why the Book Club finds it objectionable. They are not a particularly squeamish crowd, but that scene, after all, is a bit on the raw side. I daresay you could revise it in a way to suggest what happens rather than to tell it explicitly.8

In the Wright archive at Yale’s Beinecke Library, as well as the Harper & Bros. files at Princeton’s Firestone Library, no documents survive to indicate Wright’s response to this request. As Hazel Rowley notes, “What we do know is that he agreed to the cut. And soon he would find himself agreeing to further changes” (181). The scene in question occurs early in the narrative, when Bigger Thomas and his friend Jack go to a movie, killing time before their planned robbery, and engage in a masturbation contest while waiting for the picture to begin. Most of the further revisions made at the Book Club’s request further mute the sexual portrayals of Bigger and Mary Dalton, so that she becomes a significantly less active figure, both in relation to Bigger and her boyfriend, Jan. In addition, the Book Club judges sought changes to various comments and speeches made at Bigger’s trial by his Communist and Jewish attorney, Boris Max, similarly dampening Max’s rhetorical effect.9

Before examining the juxtaposed movie scenes in greater detail, I will first outline the important relationships among Wright, his editor, and his agent, Paul Reynolds. Both figures were significant enough in Wright’s career that he dedicated his final published novel, The Long Dream, “To my friends Edward C. Aswell and Paul R. Reynolds, whose aid and counsel made this book possible.” A Nashville native and Harvard graduate, Aswell fit the profile of an editor hostile to a young African American writer; indeed, he would observe to Wright nearly twenty years after their first meeting, “In the beginning you had every reason to be suspicious of me and you were” (quoted in Rowley, 140). From the start, however, Aswell championed Wright’s work, and the two men forged a
personal connection across racial boundaries. In 1957, after Wright had rejoined his former editor, then at Doubleday, Aswell wrote, “I like to recall how both of us broke down the false barriers that stood between us until at last we could meet man to man and after that, free communication between us became possible.”

Reynolds also recognized the aesthetic and psychological dimensions of Wright's relationship with his editor, as well as with the publishing firm behind him, initially advising Wright against leaving Harper because of the professional environment Aswell would be joining at McGraw-Hill (his job in between Harper and Doubleday). (Reynolds, incidentally, lived across the street from Aswell in Chappaqua and offered professional advice when Aswell was weighing job offers.) In June 1947, Reynolds advised:

I’m not at all sure how long Ed Aswell will stay with Whittlesey House [a McGraw-Hill subsidiary] or how much authority he will have there, and the executives who run the house I think you’d feel were pretty reactionary and wouldn’t be very sympathetic to your point of view. In other words, if you think you should leave Harpers I think it would probably be wiser to go to some other house than Whittlesey House. . . . You want to have a good publisher who is going to be sympathetic and helpful to your point of view. We want to be sure you don’t have a publisher who might be trying in small ways to censor what you wanted to say or who might not be willing to push a book if he personally disagreed with what you are saying. (Richard Wright Papers)

At the time of this letter, Wright was only two years removed from Black Boy's best-seller success and presumably could have commanded lucrative advances from any number of publishers, thus affording him the relative freedom to publish with a more politically supportive firm (though most contemporary readers would certainly find that Harper itself was “trying in small ways to censor” Wright’s work). Thus, in evaluating circumstantially Wright’s agreement to the revisions requested by the Book-of-the-Month Club for his first novel, we should factor in not only the obvious commercial difference a Book Club selection would make, but also Wright's trust in Aswell's opinion. While Wright's first book, Uncle Tom's Children, had won a Story magazine competition and “caused a splash” upon its publication in 1938 (Rowley, 142), its relatively light sales would hardly have been sufficient for Wright to reject the Book Club
opportunity on the basis of his commercial status at the time (assuming he would have preferred to do so), nor for Aswell to have advised him along those lines.

Turning to the movie scene itself, both as expressive of the kinds of changes made elsewhere in the narrative and as the starting point in the chain of revisions made for the Book Club, the most significant alterations involve another movie screening during Bigger and Jack’s stay, titled *The Gay Woman*, and the omission of the masturbation contest as well as a subsequent newsreel showing Mary Dalton’s family vacationing in Florida. While Wright’s original version follows the black male masturbation scene with the image of a wealthy white woman and shifts from there to a feature film set in Africa, *Trader Horn*, the revised version replaces these scenes with an innocuous newsreel and a melodrama about an adulterous wealthy woman who reconciles with her husband after he has nearly been killed in a Communist plot, then shifts to *Trader Horn* as a second feature. Portions of each episode follow.

The manuscript version would hardly have been the first instance of male masturbation in print, but certainly Wright’s description is both more casual and more explicit than the norm in American fiction of this period. But as Aimé J. Ellis points out, Bigger has no private domestic space in which such actions could occur, given that he and his family share cramped quarters in their Black Belt apartment.

Thus, Ellis argues,

> Inextricably connected to a culture that appears to emasculate, maim, and desexualize, and in every conceivable way castrate black male subjectivity, masturbation can be interpreted not only as an oppositional gesture but also as a ‘humanizing’ practice that may not be deemed as altogether subversive but that nonetheless can be understood as an enabling assertion of the self.

Along these lines, it is worth remembering that Bigger’s and Jack’s masturbation occurs with no specific visual object on screen, though they will next see Mary Dalton in the newsreel. As Jonathan Elmer notes, “if there is a link between the masturbation and the subsequent newsreel, it is only Wright and the reader who sees it. A logic might appear to link them, but that logic is not present as motivation for Bigger and Jack.” Strikingly, however, in the manuscript version the district attorney assumes exactly such a motivating logic for Mary’s murder. “Though Jack Harding would not admit it outright,” the prosecutor proclaims, “we got
The picture had not yet started and they sat listening to the pipe organ playing low and soft. Bigger moved restlessly and his breath quickened; he looked round in the shadows to see if any attendant was near, then 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 nightstick,” Bigger said.

They giggled.

“I’ll beat you,” Jack said.

“Go to hell.”

The organ played for a long moment on a single note, then died away.

. . . .

He looked at Trader Horn unfold and saw pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing.

. . . .

He frowned in the darkened movie, hearing the roll of tom-toms and the screams of black men and women dancing free and wild, men and women who were adjusted to their soil and at home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria (29–30, 33, 34).
enough information out of him to know that when the shadow of Mary Dalton was moving upon the screen those boys indulged in such an act! It was then that the idea of rape, murder, and ransom entered the mind of this moron! There is your motive and the vile circumstances under which it was conceived!” (410; original emphasis). In the 1940 edition, this reference changes to read simply, “After seeing a movie that Saturday morning . . .” (343), interestingly retaining a ghostly reference to that line’s unpublished predecessor.

These revisions thus also remove, I would suggest, the novel’s embedded opportunity for a Lacanian misrecognition of Bigger as a racialized, sexualized figure. Certainly the Book Club *Native Son* still enables its audience to read against the grain of the prosecutor’s speech, if only because those readers know there has been no rape, and no murder as such. But by including at this early point in the narrative a masturbation scene that many white readers would likely find “a bit on the raw side,” the original *Native Son* also enables its white middlebrow audience to misread Bigger along loosely the same lines as the DA: if there is no specific object of Bigger’s masturbation, that is, it becomes disconnected from yet adjacent to the cinematic images of Mary Dalton, suggesting a subtextual link that Wright implants according to the terms of such readers’ social predispositions. “If we want to spare ourselves the painful roundabout route through the misrecognition,” Slavoj Žižek writes, “we miss the Truth itself: only the ‘working-through’ of the misrecognition allows us to accede to the true nature of the other and at the same time to overcome our own deficiency.”

In this way the manuscript version of *Native Son* opens itself to such a “working-through” in ways that the Book Club version cannot, if we recognize “our own deficiency” in juxtaposing the masturbation and newsreel scenes.

In the “Restored” novel, the logic that “might appear to link” these scenes is of course cultural, and explains why the Book Club judges sought not only the removal of the masturbation scene but the newsreel episode as well, in addition to corresponding depictions of Mary’s sexual behavior and desires. As Abdul R. JanMohamed notes, this scene as a whole “publicly stages one of the fundamental circuits of identificatory exchange offered by a racialized capitalist society, a circuit that holds up the rich white woman as the ultimate object of sexual and material desire for everyone—except the racialized male subject, for whom this woman is deployed, like the object of the traditional oedipal relationship, as at once the object of ultimate desire and the object of the ultimate prohibition.” The image of Mary Dalton in the newsreel provokes exactly such
a reaction from Jack, who tells Bigger, “Ah, them rich white women’ll go
to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up. They even have their chauffeurs’” (33), just after Bigger has told Jack that he could visit Florida, but he would “be hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas” (32). The revised version of this scene deletes both these remarks, shifting straight from a summary of The Gay Woman to the second feature, Trader Horn, but now substantially altering Bigger’s reaction to the images of Africa in that film. That paragraph begins, in both versions, “They laughed. Bigger turned his eyes to the screen, but he did not look” (33), but this laughter shifts its antecedent, from Jack’s joke, “punching Bigger in the ribs, ‘if you run across something too much for you to handle at that place, let me know’” (33), to the innocuous exchange, “‘Shucks. I got a great mind
to take that job,’ Bigger said. ‘Sure. You don’t know what you might see’” (493). Thus when Bigger perceives the African characters in Trader Horn
as, unlike himself, “men and women who were adjusted to their soil and
at home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria” (34), the terms of
that perception transition from a juxtaposition highlighting the impos-
sibility of Bigger’s sexualized, racialized subjectivity to a discussion of
the Gay Woman plot that hinges largely on Bigger and Jack’s perceptions
of class difference. When Bigger in the Book Club edition, “full of a sense
of a life he had never seen,” asks Jack, “You reckon folks really act like
that?” Jack’s response is simply, “‘Sure, man. They rich’” (493). Viewed
simply as “rich,” the characters in The Gay Woman do not generate the
same kinds of racial-sexual tensions as the image of Mary Dalton in the
newsreel, leading to the necessary changes to her characterization as the
narrative proceeds, and indicating once more that Wright “would not
have been allowed to publish, at that historical moment, an actual con-
summation of cross-racial sexual desire.”

In this respect, Wright’s revisions, to this scene and more broadly,
tend to hollow out Bigger’s subjectivity, in a shift that is largely in keeping
with the narrative as a whole. One of the novel’s most striking narrative
effects is the insistent focus on a central character’s actions and thoughts,
while maintaining a comparatively undeveloped consciousness within
that guiding perspective. Native Son is structured like a Bildungsro-
man—a protagonist struggles with society and follows a downward jour-
ney toward an expected arrival into psychological maturity, even if the
narrative always withholds this conclusion—in keeping with its larger
aim of “chronicling the tragic outcomes to be found in a system of op-
pression.” At the same time that Bigger lacks the kind of intricate inner
life that defines Ulysses or Mrs. Dalloway or the Yoknapatawpha saga, the
novel allows readers no other perspective from which to view his story; as Wright explains in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” he sought throughout “to ‘enclose’ the reader’s mind in a new world, to blot out all reality except that which I was giving him” (459).  

This central narrative tension derives from the historical and cultural distinction between what the philosopher Charles Mills terms “persons” and “subpersons.” “Person,” Mills explains, “is really a technical term, a term of art, referring to a status whose attainment requires more than simple humanity,” while subpersons “are humanoid entities who, because of deficiencies linked with race, lack the moral status requisite for enjoyment of the bundle of rights and freedoms appropriate for persons.” Mills mobilizes this distinction to explain the contradiction between the modern privileging of an individual right to liberty and the vast networks of slavery and colonialism proceeding simultaneously, and indeed often embodied in such apparent paradoxes as Thomas Jefferson’s failure to free his slaves, John Locke’s shares in a slave-trading company, or Immanuel Kant’s interest in racist anthropology. Such contradictions only appear so, Mills contends, because historical reframings of egalitarianism elide the ways in which “entire categories of humans [were] systematically seen by the theory as less than persons” (217).

*Native Son*’s modernist “crisis of representation,” then, derives from the location of a subperson in the central narrative position. When I presented an earlier version of this essay at an MLA session titled “Popular Modernism,” one of the first audience responses disputed *Native Son*’s status as a modernist novel at all. This is true if we understand modernism only as a cultural movement producing what Astradur Eysteinsson influentially analyzes as “site[s] of troubled signification” (and indeed, Eysteinsson even cites a reference to *Native Son* as indicative of modernism becoming “an indistinct period term”). But the different (though no less modernist) crisis of representation that I see in Wright’s novel derives precisely from its refusal to employ high modernism’s hallmark narrative techniques. Because Bigger cannot become a modern person, in Mills’s terms, his position at the narrative center of *Native Son* exposes the ideological hollowness of what Simon Gikandi calls Kant’s “idealistic claim that it is in the universal realm of art and aesthetic judgment that we come to a sense of ourselves as free, self-reflective subjects.” Wright’s white Book Club readers, especially, are compelled to read through a subject who seems neither free nor self-reflective. This may result, historically, in readings that reinforce cultural distinctions between the cat-
egories of “Negro” and “American” even while claiming to collapse such boundaries, as in one review’s claim, cited in a Harper advertisement, that “Wright is not only the best Negro writer but an American author as distinctive as any now writing.”

At the same time, the gap between the novel’s focalization through Bigger and the narrator’s periodic references to ideas Bigger himself cannot articulate highlights the aesthetic and epistemological fissures between Bigger’s representation in the novel and the philosophical history from which the possibilities—and impossibilities—of that representation descend. Wright’s narrative mobilizes “thick racialism” at the level of character, only to subvert this ideological attitude at the level of form: because of the divide between Bigger as character and the narrative voice/Wright as implied author, *Native Son* effectively invites its readers—especially, I would suggest, its Book Club subscribers—to view Bigger Thomas as precisely the kind of intellectually and morally vacant black subject they would expect. From the novel’s beginning, the consistent perspectival focus on Bigger is in tension with a narratorial reporting on a different rhetorical and psychological register. At the conclusion of the opening scene, for example, the narration shifts from direct descriptions of Bigger’s actions and thoughts to a broader sense of his social and emotional condition.

He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. (10)

Certainly Bigger is aware of these feelings, even if they would exceed his own linguistic capacity; while the repetitive sentence structure echoes Bigger’s mode of perception, their content reframes his feelings within more complex social terms. Similarly, the narrator reports while Bigger is in prison: “Though he could not have put it into words, he felt that not only had they resolved to put him to death, but that they were determined to make his death mean more than a mere punishment; that they regarded him as a figment of that black world which they feared and were anxious to keep under control” (276). Such reminders of the gap between readers’ access to the narrator’s reports of Bigger and Big-
ger’s actual subjectivity position readers as always unable to identify fully with Bigger, compelling, especially, Wright’s white audience to reflect on the terms of and cultural reasons for that narrative impossibility. In this sense, the novel’s publication through the Book-of-the-Month Club, while premised on revisions that reinforce standard social definitions of racial identity in 1940, also heightens the self-conscious tensions that derive from reading a narrative without a regulating white point of entry (except, as I will note below, for the paratextual guarantee of readerly safety granted by Fisher’s introduction).

At this point it may be worth noting the historical power of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the 1930s and 1940s, in order to think a bit more precisely about the readers who were consuming this text. As Beth Luey points out in her history of twentieth-century American publishing, the 1930s began with fewer than 800 bookstores across the nation, while the Book Club could boast more than 100,000 members at the same time. Thus, the “club did not merely distribute books but publicized and promoted them. . . . Rather than competing with booksellers, as retailers feared, the book clubs increased sales for everyone.” By 1940, club membership had reached 500,000, yielding sales of 200,000 copies for *Native Son* just in its first three weeks on the market. As further evidence of the Book Club’s commercial power, consider that only about 60,000 more copies of the novel had sold by 1943, despite its reissue in cheaper editions by the Modern Library and Grosset & Dunlap, which together amounted to about 40,000 sales. As Aswell observes in a 1943 letter, “This fact in itself is something of a phenomenon in book publishing.” While Henry Canby and other Book Club judges were therefore in the position of cultural arbiter for their readers, they perceived this role in generally pragmatic terms, as Janice Radway demonstrates. “In their minds the value of a book was not fixed once and for all at the moment of its creation,” Radway writes, “but was established and reestablished anew in the process of exchange every time it made its way into the hands of readers who found particular uses for it in keeping with their own peculiar aims.”

Such pragmatist rhetoric swirls through Canby’s review of the novel for the Book Club newsletter, which Harper reprinted in full across both the inside and the back jackets. “Bigger—and we all know Bigger—is no persecuted black saint,” Canby advises. This ubiquitous quality allows *Native Son* to reach across racial boundaries in its readers for Canby: “And no white man—and, I suspect, few Negroes—will finish this nar-
rative without an enlargement of imagination toward the psychological problems of the Negroes in our society—and an appreciable extension of sympathy.” In Canby’s review, Native Son oscillates between the two roles most often assigned to African American literature until at least the Black Arts Movement.

Let me turn to a specific example, Harper’s initial ad for Native Son. Quoting from the conclusion of Canby’s review, the ad declares, “This powerful and sensational book is certainly the finest novel as yet written by an American Negro. . . . It is no tract or defense plea. Like The Grapes of Wrath, it is a fully realized story of unfortunates, uncompromisingly realistic, and yet quite as human as it is Negro. To the growing list of artistic achievement of a high quality by a race which is, perhaps, singularly gifted in art, NATIVE SON must surely be added, with a star for notable success.” Beyond the self-evident ways in which the last sentence, especially, assumes “the Negro” to be an essential, material category, not “something so purely social, something made in the United States” as Wright would later put it, Canby’s review and its central position in Harper’s ad implicitly distinguishes between the cultural categories of “human” and “Negro” in its claim that Native Son rather surprisingly manages to be both.

In this respect the novel as textual property—to be produced, marketed, and distributed in ways that largely confirm the prevailing racial imagery of 1940 even as these are challenged by the novel’s publication itself—reinforces the property values that Cheryl Harris has associated with whiteness. The ad’s rhetoric constructs a set of readerly assumptions around Native Son—that it is a story above all, not a politicized “tract or defense plea,” that it indeed represents “artistic achievement”—that manifest themselves as well in an often advertised blurb from Time highlighting the narrative’s “murder-mystery suspense.” The book’s original jacket continues this dynamic: while the cover consists simply of title and author’s name, with a picture of Bigger standing outside his apartment building, an overflowing trash can juxtaposed on the other side of the stairs, book buyers (or browsers) turning to the inside jacket find Canby’s Book Club newsletter review, extending across both inside flaps to the bulk of the back jacket as well, followed by a brief blurb from the Atlantic Monthly editor, and finally a note on the author.

Richard Wright was born on a plantation in Mississippi, the son of a mill worker and country school teacher. With his family con-
tinually on the move, his education and upbringing were erratic. At fifteen he left home, bumming his way all over the country, working at any kind of job from ditch-digging to clerking in a post-office, and always reading everything that fell into his hands. Eventually he became head of the Harlem branch of a New York newspaper. His first book, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, won first prize in a national contest held by *Story*. Later, the Guggenheim Committee read *Native Son* and awarded him a Fellowship.

The implied question this biographical sketch answers—how could a “Negro” come to write such an apparently important novel—simultaneously markets Wright as a typically American rags-to-riches figure while carefully emphasizing the Southern poverty of his background. Turning back to the book itself, Wright’s 1940 readers find an introduction by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a prominent author and Book Club judge, in which she declares that “the author shows genuine literary skill in the construction of his novel.” While Fisher finds *Native Son* “comparable only to Dostoievski’s revelation of human misery in wrong-doing,” she immediately assures her readers (who were, after all, not yet Wright’s), “I do not at all mean to imply that *Native Son* as literature is comparable to the masterpieces of Dostoievski” (x). As several critics have observed, Fisher’s introduction functions as “a latter-day example of the process of white authentification” produced by white “editors” introducing slave narratives. Similarly, Barbara Johnson concludes, “It is not surprising that the first edition of *Native Son* should have been preceded by an introduction by Dorothy Canfield Fisher. The envelope of Wright’s letter had to be made to say ‘The white woman is safe.’” Coupled with the various revisions made at the behest of the Book Club, the juxtaposition between the novel’s narratorial and ethical effects and its marketing through advertisements and white-authored paratexts speaks to the terms of possible publication in the 1940s United States. Just as the play between the manuscript and published movie scenes presents Wright’s original and later readers with the cultural logic undergirding racialist aesthetics as well as the means of its own undoing, the work as a whole, both in its narrative and bibliographical dimensions, signifies upon the enabling conditions of a mainstream work of African American fiction in the late modernist period.

This reading should not downplay the novel’s immense historical significance, whether considered through James Baldwin’s famous critique
in “Notes of a Native Son” or simply measured through *Native Son*’s enduring presence as one of the foundational works of twentieth-century African American literature. While the novel’s published version certainly did not prevent it from resonating so powerfully with its initial African American readers, it is worth imagining the contingencies of a counterhistory in which *Native Son* could appear publicly in its manuscript form. With the “restored version” available to contemporary readers, we can perceive another fold in the text’s production saga, by reading both texts with and against each other.

II. “American Ideals” and *American Hunger*: Shaping *Black Boy*

A similar dynamic plays out for the publication of *Black Boy* as a Book Club selection, in this case resulting famously in the deletion of the manuscript’s second half, detailing Wright’s life in Chicago following his escape from the South, and the subsequent rewriting of what then became the book’s closing paragraphs. Rather than submit to a lengthy process of revision and more revision, filtered through letters from Dorothy Canfield Fisher on behalf of the Book Club, Wright at this point in his career could conceivably have sacrificed the club’s virtual guarantee of greater sales and stood his aesthetic ground: promoted as “By the author of *Native Son,*” *Black Boy* would very likely have remained a market sensation, if probably ascending to lesser commercial heights than with the Book Club imprimatur. The changes to *Black Boy* are more radical than those in *Native Son,* as they transform Wright’s ending into a hopeful, because ambiguous, look to the potential of Chicago and the North, allowing readers to assume a comparatively easy journey to Wright’s becoming the author of *Native Son* (events which are left unnarrated in Wright’s manuscript as well, but whose difficulty is clearly gestured toward in the ultimately bleak portrayal of segregated Chicago life, even among the Communist Party). *Black Boy* is largely a narrative of a subperson’s construction by the racist environment surrounding him, though in this case that character, unlike Bigger, is infused throughout with the mental life, and thus “moral status,” of a “person” in Mills’s terms. *Black Boy*’s crisis of representation is thus more overt, but its textual history also reveals the material tensions informing the production of such a narrative in the midcentury United States, as the commercial and political need for nar-
rative openness transfers the narrow range of representable sexualities in *Native Son* into a broader insistence on the implicitly white North as a zone of social possibility.

The apparent irony of Wright’s more extensive revisions, despite his much more established commercial status, can again be explained in part through his correspondence with Aswell and Reynolds. In between *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Wright had seen his novel transformed into a Broadway play, completed *12 Million Black Voices*, worked extensively on two full drafts of what would have been his second novel, *Black Hope*, and, after setting that project aside, begun plans for a different novel, *The Jackal*. Never completed, *Black Hope* would have been Wright’s only novel with a female protagonist, Maud Hampton, a light-skinned young woman in New York.\(^{33}\) Wright’s struggles with this project were not sufficient to endanger its planned publication, but, unknown to him, Aswell and the Harper marketing executives were concerned. As Aswell noted in a 1942 memo: “Give it a page and list it simply as the new novel by Richard Wright, instead of the usual description. Say little or nothing about this book, but emphasize that this is Wright’s first novel since *Native Son*, which he has been working on for more than two years” (Harper Bros. Papers). Similarly, Reynolds warned his client that the direction of his novelistic career could well turn on the success of *Black Hope*, writing in April 1942:

> If it has a large sale you have a fair chance of being somewhat a fixed star in the publishing firmament. Your books will vary in sales but they should hold up among the class of large sellers say the way a man like Steinbeck does, or A.J. Cronin. If BLACK HOPE doesn’t sell, you will remain the author of NATIVE SON and the trade and the book stores and everybody will think of you in that way. (Rowley, 265)

While the production process for *Black Boy* echoes and expands upon the revisions required for *Native Son*, Wright’s more reluctant acquiescence to the Book Club’s changes may well have been overcome by a different motivation for commercial success, namely, to become something more than “the author of NATIVE SON” in the minds of publishers and booksellers. Furthermore, Reynolds at this time represented both Wright and Fisher, and had profited handsomely from his more established client, selling the serial rights to her 1933 novel *Bonfire* for $30,000 for example, despite the economic climate of the Great Depression.\(^{34}\) At
least the opportunity for a conflict of interest arises when considering Reynolds's role as mutual agent.

As with *Native Son*, Wright initially revised a scene involving a black phallus, this time at Aswell’s behest even before the proofs had been sent to the Book Club. Whereas the masturbation scene in *Native Son* functions on at least one level as Bigger and Jack’s response to their symbolic castration, the *Black Boy* scene enacts precisely that mode of social oppression. While the young Richard is working for the optical instruments company in Memphis, his white associate Reynolds approaches, as part of an ongoing pattern of harassment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original version</th>
<th>Revised version</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Richard, how long is your thing,” he asked me.</td>
<td>“Nigger, you think you’ll ever amount to anything?” he asked in a slow, sadistic voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What thing?” I asked.</td>
<td>“I don’t know, sir,” I answered, turning my head away.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“You know what I mean,” he said.</td>
<td>“What do niggers think about?” he asked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The thing the bull uses on the cow.”</td>
<td>“I don’t know, sir,” I said, my head still averted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I turned away from him; I had heard that whites regarded Negroes as animals in sex matters and his words made me angry.</td>
<td>“If I was a nigger, I’d kill myself,” he said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I heard that a nigger can stick his prick in the ground and spin around on it like a top,” he said, chuckling. “I’d like to see you do that. I’d give you a dime, if you did it” (188).</td>
<td>I said nothing. I was angry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You don’t know why?” he asked. I still said nothing.</td>
<td>“You don’t know why?” he asked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“But I don’t reckon niggers mind being niggers,” he said suddenly and laughed (412).</td>
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Strikingly, the revised passage replaces a spectatorial obsession with the violent fantasy of shameful death; clearly, both interactions are motivated by the white man’s simultaneous fascination and horror entailed by imagining himself as black, projecting first a phenomenological and then epistemological divide between himself and Richard, both of which stand in for the cultural (il)logic of racial identity. Wright’s shift, from the African American man as object of physical to mental curiosity interestingly parallels *Black Boy’s* broader readerly effect, as the physical presence maintained by Bigger transitions into a prolonged description of what Richard “think[s] about.”
Such an emphasis on physical presence manifests itself in the autobiography’s title as well, though at this stage the manuscript was still called American Hunger. This had replaced the original Black Hunger, with Southern Night and The First Chapter floated as possibilities (the latter suggested by the Book Club) before Wright settled on Black Boy in August 1944. Once Wright had agreed to cut the book’s Chicago section, a new title became necessary as well; as he explained to Aswell, “Now, this is not very original, but I think it covers the book. It is honest. Straight. And many people say it to themselves when they see a Negro” (Rowley, 290). As Wright’s frustrated tone suggests, the process of securing the Book Club’s approval for Black Boy was much more complicated than for Native Son, with extensive negotiations among Wright, Reynolds, Aswell, and Fisher, on behalf of the other judges. Beyond the change in the narrative’s destination, the composition and revision of a new closing section generated a series of correspondence between Wright and Fisher, with the elder woman gently insisting on a more forgiving attitude toward Northern white society. This despite the fact that Fisher herself had recently refused to accommodate her own work to the political tastes of an editor, determining not to change her portrayal of an anti-Semitic private school in her 1939 novel Seasoned Timber for serialization in Woman’s Home Companion.

Originally, “Southern Night,” as the first section of American Hunger, related Wright’s secret departure from Memphis to Chicago and had a simple conclusion.

I stepped from the elevator into the street, half expecting someone to call me back and tell me that it was all a dream, that I was not leaving.

This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled. (257)

With the Chicago section of the narrative, “The Horror and The Glory,” now absent as the counterpoint to this conclusion, Wright set about revising the ending for Chapter XIV, and the book as a whole, in response to the suggestion relayed to Aswell of another Book Club judge, Clifton Fadiman, “that he summarize briefly, and make explicit, the meaning that is now implicit in the preceding pages” (Harper Bros. Papers). The content, and especially the tone, of this new conclusion went through multiple revisions over two months, from late May to late July 1944, with
letters and telegrams triangulated among Fisher, Aswell, and Wright. Couched in a rhetoric of almost grandmotherly advice—born in 1879, Fisher was nearly thirty years Wright's elder, at one point praising the "reasonableness and ingenuity from a man young enough (I assume) to be my grandson!" (Madigan, Keeping Fires, 239)—Fisher's correspondence insists on a softening of Wright's self-reliant attitude toward Northern white understanding.

Their exchanges circle around a series of questions Wright asks about this stage in his life: "What was it that made me conscious of possibilities? From where in this southern darkness had I caught a sense of freedom?" From the start, Wright answered in terms of his early reading—"It had been only through books," the following paragraph begins (413)—but Fisher sought a more developed sense of that reading, particularly in regard to its Americanness. "I gather that you cannot bring yourself to use, even once, the word 'American' in speaking of 'the tinge of warmth which came from an unseen light,'" she asks in a July 12 letter, continuing, "However dimly that light came to you, suffering so acutely from the rough denial of the very existence of American ideals, part of it must have come through American delineation of American characters" (Madigan, Keeping Fires, 234, 235). In response, Wright added and revised two paragraphs, acknowledging, "It had been my accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life's possibilities," and citing in Theodore Dreiser, Edgar Lee Masters, H. L. Mencken, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis a sense of being "defensively critical of the straitened American environment," and thus a feeling "that America could be shaped nearer to the hearts of those who lived in it" (Black Boy, 413). As Rowley notes, these references would serve "not at all as the glowing epithets that Canfield intended" (289). Wright's frustrations with this process are clear in his letters to Aswell, declaring a week after the Fisher letter cited above, "I really feel that this ought to do the thing" (quoted in Rowley, 289). Wright takes on a more conciliatory tone in his letters to Fisher herself, and Aswell remains solicitous of her approval throughout, writing initially, "Mr. Wright's first problem is to satisfy you and I don't know whether he has succeeded. Needless to say, I hope he has" (Harper Bros. Papers). By July 24, Aswell sent Fisher a telegram seeking her final approval: "PLEASE WIRE COLLECT WHETHER RICHARD WRIGHT'S NEW CONCLUSION MAILED YOU FRIDAY IS SATISFACTORY. I THINK IT EXCELLENT BUT AM DELAYING SETTING IT PENDING YOUR APPROVAL,"
prompting her reply on the same day, “I WROTE RICHARD WRIGHT YESTERDAY MY COMPLETE APPROVAL OF HIS ENDING IN PRESENT FORM” (Harper Bros. Papers). The question of the title was finally resolved a month later, but publication was delayed until February 1945, as the Book Club deliberated about which month to announce its official selection.

As with Native Son, Fisher’s paratextual comments inform the terms of Black Boy’s reception, through her review in the Book Club newsletter and a blurb requested by Aswell, appealing to Fisher as “Richard Wright’s original sponsor,” which was eventually published with the main text and labeled an “introductory note” (Harper Bros. Papers). As Aswell explained in a June letter, “Instead of putting it on the jacket, I should like to insert it as an introductory note in the book itself, thus making it a permanent part of the book” (Harper Bros. Papers). Reynolds, in one of his few departures from Aswell’s preferences in such matters, objected to this placement, sensing the more contingent status of the jacket blurb as a subtle way to disengage Wright from Fisher’s shadow. “While I think this comment by Dorothy Canfield Fisher is grand and certainly ought to be used in any way possible,” Reynolds wrote, “I personally would rather see it used on the jacket than in the body of the book. Richard Wright seems to me so well known now that he doesn’t need any puff or possibly implied apology in the body of his book and to announce the book as with an introduction by Dorothy Canfield Fisher seems to me almost to be scattering your shots” (Harper Bros. Papers).

Fisher’s note does indeed read as an “implied apology.”

More than eighty-five years ago, Oliver Wendell Holmes nobly said, “It is so much easier to consign a soul to perdition or to say prayers to save it, than to take the blame on ourselves for letting it grow up in neglect and run to ruin. The English law began, only in the late eighteenth century, to get hold of the idea that crime is not necessarily a sin. The limitations of human responsibility have never been properly studied.”

If Dr. Holmes were alive now, he would be proud as I am proud, of the chance to help bring to the thoughtful attention of intelligent, morally responsible Americans, the honest, dreadful, heart-breaking story of a Negro childhood and youth, as set down by that rarely gifted American author, Richard Wright. (Harper Bros. Papers)
At the time of his death in 1935, Holmes was the longest-serving jurist in the history of the Supreme Court, but his citation here, along with Fisher’s analogical elevation to an equivalent level of pride, combine to displace Wright himself from the central focus of these paragraphs, an effect heightened by the note’s placement as a “permanent part of the book” and its advertisement on the jacket as well. While Fisher’s introduction to Native Son announces the safety of the novel for white readers, her note for Black Boy oscillates between Holmes’s insight as a criticism of white society and Fisher’s repositioning of Wright’s memoir away from such political indictments and toward an individual “honest, dreadful, heart-breaking” testimonial.

This tension, between autobiography as a narrowly focused narrative or as a metaphorical expression of larger social concerns, surely motivates the most surprising feature of American Hunger/Black Boy, Wright’s decision to end the story well before the event for which he was already most familiar to his audience, the composition of Native Son. Such a readerly desire appears in a photo essay in the June 4, 1945, issue of Life, with actors recreating various scenes from Black Boy. The final image, of the boxing match between Richard and Harrison, carries the legend: “Black Boy ends as Wright, 18, leaves the South. Wright plans to complete his autobiography and tell what happened to him after he went north. That story would include early jobs in Chicago as porter and ditchdigger, work on the Federal Writers Project, how he joined the Communist Party and left it, how he married a white woman, settled in Brooklyn, wrote his best-selling Native Son” (Richard Wright Papers). There is no evidence that Wright had such plans, of course, beyond publishing the Chicago sections of his original manuscript, which Aswell promised Harper would do in “some future book” (Rowley, 287). But to carry his story beyond that point, into marriage, life in Brooklyn, and the writing of Native Son, clearly lies outside of Wright’s conception of his autobiography, even as this deliberate omission plays on the popular desire for such a story. The major problem with this autobiographical conclusion is presumably its ability to undercut the political force of the preceding narrative, especially in its manuscript form: as the renowned and wealthy author of Native Son, Wright becomes the kind of exception to the rule that can be misread as undercutting a broader critique of racialized social structures.

Juxtaposing the original and Book-of-the-Month Club versions of American Hunger/Black Boy, then, demonstrates the much broader ef-
fect of the changes between manuscript and print in this case. Whereas the revisions to *Native Son* radiate out from altered local details to more global representations of race and sexuality, the omission of “The Horror and the Glory,” along with the revised Chapter XIV, alter the shape of the narrative itself, with ripples extending back across the remaining autobiographical structure. The successful, or even redemptive, story of *Native Son*’s production (however ironized that story becomes in contrast to the actual history of the text’s transformation into its Book Club state) indirectly influences readers’ approaches to the conclusion of *American Hunger* or *Black Boy*, though in the case of the original manuscript, that journey is much more fraught, given Wright’s fragile desire “to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal” (384). By purposefully leaving the construction of that bridge as an unrepresented event in an unnarrated future, *American Hunger* only gestures toward that process, with its final image of Wright holding pencil over paper and waiting “until I knew what to say” (383). The closing lines that Wright negotiated with Fisher, on the other hand—“With ever watchful eyes and bearing scars, visible and invisible, I headed North, full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront men without fear or shame, that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars” (415)—offer a much grander and more abstract vision of an almost celestial “North” into which Wright ascends. Authorial agency shifts in this passage from Wright alone, awaiting knowledge and inspiration, to an anonymous figure among the men poised on the brink of their “redeeming meaning.”

In fact, neither of these narratives accurately represents the production of *Native Son*. From the conversations and newspaper clippings Margaret Walker provided about the Robert Nixon murder case in Chicago, to Jane Newton’s “endless discussions” about the novel in progress while Wright lived at the Newtons’ house in Brooklyn, to the “‘positively public way” Newton remembers the novel being composed (Rowley, 155, 156), it is clear that *Native Son*, like virtually every text, went through an inherently social process of composition and revision, long before the galleys arrived at the desks of the Book-of-the-Month Club judges. To imagine “private” or “public” versions of *Native Son* or *Black Boy*, any more than “right” or “wrong” editions, misreads the historical networks through
which texts make their way to the literary marketplace. In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright navigates between African American writers’ ostensibly exclusive choices of authorial authenticity or compromise. “Are they being called upon to ‘preach’?” Wright asks. “To be ‘salesmen’? To ‘prostitute’ their art? What is the relationship between ‘something to believe in’ and artistic expression?” (48). Wright’s way out of this dilemma is to rely on “perspective”: “the frame in which the picture is hung,” or “that part of a poem, novel, or play which writers never put directly upon paper, but which is sensed in every line of the work” (49). That immaterial sense of the work, grounded in the material production of various versions in documents, expresses as well the most illuminating perspective from which to read the fluid texts of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, and the “double vision” necessary to perceive the social processes of African American textual production.39

Notes

I am grateful for the Bibliographical Society of America’s 2010 Mercantile Library Fellowship in North American Bibliography fellowship, which enabled my archival research at Princeton’s Firestone Library and Yale’s Beinecke Library.

1. *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are the most dramatic examples of a publishing trend that continued for much of Wright’s career, from Harper’s original rejection of “Bright and Morning Star” in *Uncle Tom’s Children* to the “drastic cutting” of the manuscript for *The Outsider*, which Paul Gilroy aptly terms “a book that was uncomfortable with its editor’s attempts to turn it into a murder mystery” (*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993], 171). By that point Wright’s original editor at Harper had left, and he was working with John Fischer, who, as the author of an “impassioned piece of Cold War propaganda,” was less sympathetic than Edward Aswell to Wright’s politics (Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 355). The “drastic cutting” reference appears in a letter from Fischer to Wright and is quoted in Rowley, 405. Subsequent references to her biography will be made parenthetically.


5. Paul Taylor, “Malcolm’s Conk and Danto’s Color; or, Four Logical Petitions


9. The British publisher Gollancz, which had “turned it down flatly” after reading the original manuscript, also accepted the revised version (quoted in Wright, *Native Son*, 486).

10. Richard Wright Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Subsequent references will be noted in the text.

11. Rampersad notes that *Trader Horn*, which was nominated for an Oscar, “is about a woman who is kidnapped by an African ’tribe’ who worship her as a white goddess” before her eventual departure (Richard Wright, *Works*, vol. 1 [New York: Library of America, 1991], 490). The immersion of the white woman in “native” African tribal culture here clearly refracts Mary Dalton’s position in Bigger and Jack’s jokes about wealthy white women and their black chauffeurs.


25. Selected Records of Harper & Brothers, Box 33, Folder 16; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, reprinted with permission. Subsequent references to these materials will be made parenthetically.


33. In both his earlier and later drafts, Wright focuses on the harsh conditions confronting black domestic servants in New York. In the original manuscripts, Maud is violently raped and imprisoned by Basin, a Southern criminal who transports her to
New York for an unspecified role in an apparent prostitution ring there. This draft breaks off before completion. In the revised version, Maud passes in marriage, inheriting a fortune from her white husband, before ultimately killing herself and designating her black maid as her heir. Wright concludes in a synopsis prepared for reading the work in progress, “The ultimate purpose of the novel is to dramatize in terms of concrete action, the position of woman in modern society (this is not a novel with a ‘feminist’ theme!) and to reveal in a symbolic manner the potentially strategic position, socially and politically, which women occupy in the world today” (Richard Wright Papers).


35. As evidence of the title’s fluidity, an Aswell memo from late July 1944 lists eighteen possibilities in all, including *The American Way, Black Hope* (apparently recycled from the abandoned novel), *Black Reality, Dark Awakening*, and *In a Strange Land* (Harper Bros. Papers).

36. Madigan, *Keeping Fires*, 190–91. Fisher saw herself as a sympathetic and understanding reader of Wright’s (and other African Americans’) literature, concluding one letter: “I’m venturing to send you my last book (not a very picturesque or interesting one, although written with all my heart) because of a few pages in it, comparing the general attitude towards women to that towards Negroes. It’s only an analogy, partial, but may be worth your looking at it” (Madigan, *Keeping Fires*, 237). That last book was *Our Young Folks* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1943), which had grown out of Fisher’s service on the American Youth Commission in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In a chapter titled “Equal Rights in Business,” she investigates the role of women in the workplace, concluding, “It is almost startling to consider how closely the economic positions accorded to American women in the productive world parallels that of colored people. . . . Women have, with no consent or will of theirs, been transplanted, like Negroes, from their old homeland where they were bosses of the useful work they did into a new world where, like colored people, they are regarded as useful servitors, never as bosses” (189–90).


38. In a somewhat different vein, Janice Thaddeus in “The Metamorphosis of *Black Boy*” analyzes the manuscript and published versions of Wright’s autobiography as “defined and open” (in Gates and Appiah, 272).