Enemies of All Humankind
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Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son* was published in 1940, and it immediately became a commercial bestseller. It was the first novel written by an African American author to be a selection of the prestigious Book of the Month Club, and the novel’s most severe critics were African American scholars who felt that African Americans had been misrepresented by the character of Bigger Thomas (see, for example, Baldwin, *Notes*). Wright tells the story of a young and angry African American man, Bigger Thomas, who is hired by the rich, white Dalton family to be their chauffeur. Before taking the job, he has always lived in the segregated Chicago ghetto and has rarely been near white people. On his first night on the job, Thomas kills Mary, the Daltons’ daughter, thus positioning himself as a violent free agent. When her body is found, Thomas flees with his girlfriend, Bessie Mears, whom he rapes and kills. Eventually, he is caught and put on trial, which causes a spate of white violence in retaliation against African Americans. Thomas’s white lawyer, Boris Max, pleads that Thomas’s violence was the direct result of oppression, but, like Wansley in Ellms, Thomas is sentenced to death. *Native Son* is divided into three parts, titled “Fear,” “Flight,” and “Fate.” The first two parts are fast paced and narrate the events that culminate, in “Fear,” in the murder of Mary Dalton and, in “Flight,” in Thomas’s capture. The third part consists of his trial and death sentence. This part is completely different in pace and tone; it mostly revisits and renarrates the first two parts.

In 1937, Richard Wright postulated that a separate “Negro way of life” existed in America that had not been established by choice but was “forced upon them from without by lynch rope, bayonet, and mob rule” (“Blueprint,” 271). Wright saw himself confronted with civilizational discourses that dismissed his own perspective as less than fully civilized, much like the early republic vis-à-vis Europe. At the time Wright wrote his novel, tra-
ditional discriminatory notions of natural innocence informed all interactions of African Americans and whites within the nation-state. In response, Wright claimed, “a new role is developing upon [sic] the Negro writer. He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live, and die,” but to do so within the American nationalist logic of the beloved community into which African Americans were to be integrated (“Blueprint,” 271–72).

Traditional ways to claim legitimate free agency—that is, representative agency over natural innocents—remained unconvincing to Wright. The obvious reason for his reluctance to accept the paterfamilias as a suitable model was the role of the slaveholder as a supposedly legitimate representative of his slaves. Another solution had to be found, one that addressed the core problem of oppression for African Americans—a discourse, in other words, that not just allowed but forced whites to accept the free agency of African Americans as equals. The general atmosphere of oppression that formed and informed “the social institutions of the Negro,” Wright argued, had to be countered with a very specific African American affirmation of nationalism: “Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them” (“Blueprint,” 271). Native Son constitutes a narrative attempt to imagine an undeniable free agency for African Americans as equals to whites, an attempt that explicitly uses the figure of the pirata and the foundational logic of the frontier model of civilization to substantiate this claim. In this sense, Wright anticipates the strategy of the civil rights movement of the 1960s that fundamentally “refused the expectation that to be full participants in the social and political order they [African Americans] needed to assimilate culturally and linguistically to a white middle-class American way of being in the world. Instead, they demanded respect for and recognition of their particular racial and ethnic identities and declared that the new era of race relations meant that nonwhite peoples in the United States would no longer have to occupy the place of second-class citizens” (Markus and Moya, “Doing Race,” 57).

To integrate the affirmation of group identity with an affirmation of the nation-state as legitimate, Bigger Thomas’s claim to agency in Native Son (hereafter abbreviated in the citations as NS) is formulated as the genesis of a foundational pure woman pirata. This position of the pirata is stabilized by the exclusion of strategies to obtain free agency that Wright identifies as unconvincing. First, he excludes the notion of traditional representative agency. The beginning of the novel characterizes the protagonist as a dependent in a single-parent household after the violent death of his father, and Thomas remains unable to make representative claims over anyone throughout the novel (Takeuchi, “Bigger”). For instance, Thomas’s attempts
to establish representative claims over Mears, his girlfriend and accomplice, fail (NS, 180 and 260). But before he can suffer from this failure, he decides to separate himself from her; instead of ruling her, he rapes and murders her (NS, 264–70). In the course of the novel, Thomas ceases to fail at traditional representative agency; instead, he decides to no longer seek it.

In a similar vein, Wright dismisses the African American traditions of liberation through education and of assimilation into existing institutional structures. He bases this rejection on the claim that the “Negro way of life” encompasses “two separate cultures . . .: one for the Negro masses, unwritten and unrecognized; and the other for the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered” (“Blueprint,” 270). In constructing this dichotomy, Wright uses the narrative tradition of the slave narrative to substantiate his construction of the hostis humani generis constellation in the novel. Like those in the slave narrative, Wright’s praedones are collectively of a different race (white) and are the expressions of an explicitly institutional injustice along the lines of Elaine Scarry’s characterization of the torturer (Body in Pain, 56–59). As in the slave narrative, the act of violence by the field slave is read as an act of liberation that is contrasted with the mute submission of the house slave (see Cassuto, “Frederick Douglass”).

In Native Son, these two African American “cultures,” as Wright calls them, are represented by the two chauffeurs in the service of the Daltons, a family whose members control much of Chicago’s segregated urban infrastructure and therefore the space within which all the figures in the novel move. The representative of the “Negro bourgeoisie” who follows the path of educated assimilation is a man named Green, who does not appear in the story but who is mentioned as Thomas’s predecessor in the chauffeur job. Green has gone to night school during his long employment by the Daltons and has received an education according to the wishes of his employers. Still, these same employers eventually deny him a job that is appropriate for his superior education; even though they support African American education, they generally do not hire African Americans for jobs that allow them to rise socially (NS, 86, 92–93, and 357–58).

The second chauffeur (Thomas), who represents the “unwritten and unrecognized [African American] masses,” replaces Green after the latter leaves to take up an unspecified job “with the government” (NS, 86). Thomas is not interested in work ethics, piety, or education. Just as he refuses to be a representative paterfamilias to his impoverished family, Thomas refuses to be represented by the Daltons, who want to educate him (NS, 92–93), or by the “Negro institutions” that want to install piety in him (NS, 368). Because of his refusal of all legitimate paths open to African Americans, his desire for
agency is necessarily expressed in the realm of illegitimate violence. He does not succumb to his mother’s and his employers’ wishes that he might quietly work hard and better himself to achieve unspecified goals; instead, he murders Mary, his employers’ daughter, burns her body in the Daltons’ furnace, and attempts to blackmail the parents into paying ransom money. He revels in his ability to control the situation, as well as to artfully manipulate the behavior of whites, who consider him incapable of reason.

His scheme collapses when he loses his nerve—as he did in his self-sabotaged plan to rob a white storekeeper early in the novel (NS, 44)—and avoids the furnace, which then draws too much smoke. Annoyed with Thomas, others attend to it, and Mary’s body is found (NS, 245–47). Thomas flees and kills again in his attempt to escape, but he is eventually captured and put on trial. His transformation into a violent free agent is thus complete and can go no further; the third part of the novel, then, positions him as a foundational pirata rather than a random criminal.

The narrative construction of Thomas as a foundational pirata whose actions are a normative response to oppression is divided into two parts. While the first two parts of the novel narrate the transformative development of Thomas’s piratical consciousness, the third part responds to the logic of the frontier model that requires the transformed pirata’s action to have foundational consequences for the space he engages in—consequences that are independent of his actions as an agent. Two initially marginal characters become central after Thomas’s capture. The first is Jan Erlone, Mary’s communist boyfriend who becomes important to the plot after having an epiphany. Confronted with his girlfriend’s murder, Erlone abandons all notions of proletarian revolution; he recharacterizes these early convictions as aspects of blindness to the real nature of oppression, and realizes that Mary’s murder constitutes a normative disruption that can now serve as the basis of civilizing development in the sense of the frontier model. In consequence, he vows to stand by Thomas to further this more authentic disruption of American institutions (NS, 99 and 317). The second character that only takes center stage in the third part is Boris Max, the lawyer whom Erlone hires for Thomas. In court, Max presents the normative interpretation of Thomas’s actions and, through his interpretation, initiates the legitimating transition from constitutive to constituted violence. It is primarily Max who works to restructure the law on the basis of the pirata’s foundational disruption.

Erlone’s epiphany and the character of Max as a whole have been criticized as wooden elements of an unconvincing plot twist and have essentially been dismissed as the result of bad craftsmanship on the part of the author (see Baldwin, Notes, 39; Menand, American Studies, 83). However, these much-criticized aspects of the narrative are needed to render Thomas’s fate
meaningful as that of a foundational pirata. During the trial, Max interprets Thomas’s actions throughout the novel with an accuracy that frequently borders on narrative redundancy. While not exactly reader-friendly, renarrating these actions in the context of the law achieves something important: it allows Max to exorcise Thomas’s deeds. Precisely because Max is so right about everything the reader already knows of Thomas’s inner life, the lawyer’s pleas and arguments meticulously separate the illegitimate acts of violence from their legitimate normative meaning. In this way, Thomas’s deeds can be used to inform a restructuring of the law that may acknowledge, and eventually remove, the oppression of African Americans. Only if they constitute the foundational moment for a removal of oppression on this nonviolent legal basis can Thomas’s deeds really begin to “mean” something to the nation (NS, 421).

The restructuring of the law is necessary, Wright suggests, because it is the legal oppression of African Americans that has caused Thomas’s violence in the first place. In the novel, Mary Dalton’s murder is the direct result of Thomas’s fear of being subjected to a traditional collaboration between the criminal justice system and violent racist oppression. Wright portrays the murder in the following way: It is Thomas’s first night on the job, and he drives Mary to meet her boyfriend, Erlone. Mary and Erlone urge Thomas to eat and drink with them as their equal. Unable to escape them and painfully aware of his own anxiety, Thomas fully understands for the first time that he exists in a society informed by segregation. Because Mary and Erlone are so friendly, it occurs to Thomas that segregation—although naturalized in this society—might not be natural to humankind. The friendly interaction between blacks and whites on an equal footing is described as a “No Man’s Land” of unchartered consequences (NS, 98). Stepping into this no man’s land during his night out with Mary and Erlone shakes Thomas profoundly because he realizes that all of his learned, naturalized behavior is useless once he stops considering whites as his natural superiors. At the end of the night, Erlone leaves, and Mary is too drunk to get to her room alone. Thomas helps her into the house and then to bed. Rather than leaving immediately after that, he lingers with the thought of molesting her; but before he can decide on a first step in any direction, Mary’s blind mother enters the room. Out of fear that he might be discovered, Thomas smotheres Mary, and Mrs. Dalton leaves without noticing him.

Thomas panics because an African American man cannot be found in a white woman’s bedroom, regardless of his intentions, without having to expect vicious retaliation. The rape of a white woman by an African American man is a cultural topos that, for Wright, epitomizes the violent logic of oppression. “If a Negro rebels against rule and taboo, he is lynched and the
reason for the lynching is usually called ‘rape,’” Wright argues in a comment on the novel, “that catchword which has garnered such vile connotations that it can raise a mob anywhere in the South pretty quickly, even today” (“‘Bigger,’” 7). Thomas knows this and commits violence only to remove himself from the threat of violence: the murder of Mary is thus characterized as an incidental effect of Thomas’s oppression.

Nevertheless, after the fact, the murder is reinterpreted by him as a constitutive moment that proves his ability to assume the status of a free agent rather than only that of a bonded innocent. Never for a moment does Thomas admit to the somewhat accidental dimension of Mary’s death; instead, he almost immediately insists that he has murdered her (NS, 135–36). After all, as we saw in the Wansley trial, murder is by definition the act of a free agent, and because Thomas is African American and assumed to have natural innocence, taking on the status of a murderer allows him to be permanently situated in a no man’s land. The murder of Mary becomes the reason why he cannot be less than a free agent on equal footing with whites—after all, white law itself is now forced to recognize him as free.

At the same time, Thomas’s original position of free agency through murder is transformed into the position of a pirata with the double charge of murder and rape brought against him. Rape in Native Son replaces piracy as a relational crime that assigns normative importance to an individual and somewhat random act of murder. For Wright, an African American man’s rape of a white woman does not primarily signify illegitimate violence against women but constitutes the legitimate reaction of an African American man to white oppression in general. Rape, in the novel, is strictly a metaphor for black-white race relations, and a clear-cut case of “hommo-social [sic] relations” (Butler, Gender Trouble, 40) between the invading perpetrator and the victim’s protectors. In the novel, Thomas accordingly reasons that “rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one’s back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face” (NS, 258). Because this metaphorical dimension of rape is the only significant one in the novel, on the level of agency it is not relevant whether or not physical rape has actually taken place.

Even though it is clear from the original manuscript of Native Son that “when Bigger was with Mary in her bedroom, he had rape in his heart” (Menand, American Studies, 80), Native Son goes to great length to inform the reader that the rape charge in the case of Mary Dalton is unfounded and springs solely from the imagination of white prejudice against African Americans in general. Thomas unambiguously denies the charge (NS, 378), but the fact that Mary’s burned corpse cannot be examined for traces of
rape is to Thomas’s disadvantage, as the charge of rape cannot be disproved (NS, 337). This leads us back to Wansley and his charge of racism against the court. Just as we as readers know that Max is completely correct about his interpretation of Thomas’s motivation, we also know that the charge of Mary’s rape is the result of prejudice rather than evidence. The question that remained unanswerable in Wansley’s case—has he acted in response to extraordinary pressure, or is he a liar trying to downplay his own malice?—is resolved from the start in Wright. The Wansley trial’s underlying question—is it possible, under the conditions of racism, for a perpetrator to be considered bonded (that is, innocent)?—is brought to the attention of Native Son’s reader with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. It is also answered in the affirmative. While Thomas had “created a new world for himself” through murder, it is the rape charge that “utterly excluded him from the world” around him (NS, 272–73)—not least because the world around him is, to a significant degree, too racist to stand in legitimate judgment over him.

The use of rape as a metaphor—the normative violation of “their symbol of beauty” (NS, 195)—is why Thomas’s acts of violence may be seen, even by his opponents, as acts of defiance against a specifically American regime of racialized oppression. It is, Wright emphasizes, white society itself that insists most on the rape charge. The state attorney who prosecutes Thomas bluntly states that the real crime for which he is on trial is not the murder of a white woman—instead, that “the central crime here is [her] rape!” (NS, 437). Just as white society has rendered Thomas a free agent by defining murderers in this way, it now characterizes his alleged rape of a white woman as an act of normative defiance comparable to the treason of the pirata renegade. In this sense, Thomas’s position as a pirata is a position in relation to white American law itself and can—even must—be understood in this context. Consequently, it is in the realm of the law that his foundational potential in the spirit of the frontier model of civilization unfolds.

Max does not deny Thomas’s violence, but he explains it in different terms than those of individual responsibility. Instead, Max argues that African Americans’ violence is a natural result of their oppressed lives and that only the removal of oppression can truly pacify and simultaneously revitalize the nation (NS, 420–23). Like the trial part’s redundant renarration of the two first parts’ plot and character development, Max’s explanation of the nature of oppression corresponds directly with the more general formulation of Thomas’s feelings in the novel, thus highlighting Thomas’s worthiness of such a foundational reading.

Just as James Fenimore Cooper explicitly cites the Barbary renegade plot in his writing about Native Americans, Wright refers to the model that underlies his usage of hostis humani generis in Native Son. In Wright’s case,
these citations concern the notion of territorial space that is intimately interwoven with the novel’s construction of the law, and the specification of the “older society” (Turner, “Frontier,” 62) as the classic European models of civilization (embodied by the parents of Mary Dalton) that are to be replaced by the frontier model. The novel’s specific construction of the oppressive “older society” relies, first and foremost, on the portrayal of a spatially segregated society. This is why Thomas’s normative transgression consists in his ignoring the color line, and why situations that render segregation irrelevant can be described as a socially transformative no man’s land.

In all corners of the nation, Wright suggests, whites already follow the American way of life and are thus part of the beloved community, but they are generally unaware of how African Americans live and to what illegitimate extent they are excluded from the national community (NS, 101 and 318). The oppressive reality of segregation as a national condition is indicated by Wright’s setting the novel in a northern city whose spatial properties mirror the segregation in the South (NS, 276). According to Wright, the segregation of African Americans naturalizes the vastly different conditions of life and the different opportunities available to African Americans and whites on a national scale.

African Americans in the novel largely remain unaware of the extent of their exclusion, simply because their lives generally do not intersect with the lives of whites. Thomas’s fundamental dissatisfaction with his life at the beginning of the novel is without aim or direction because he does not know why exactly his life feels so impoverished, even though oppression already informs all of his actions. In the beginning of the novel, as mentioned above, Thomas sabotages his own plot to hold up a store with his gang because the owner is white and violence against him is unthinkable. Only later does Thomas understand that “they ruled him, even when they were far away and not thinking of him, ruled him by conditioning him in his relations to his own people” (NS, 145).

The consequences of a continuation of oppression far exceed those of the continuation of African American violence, as Max argues in the novel. Wright sees totalitarianism itself as the threatening result of the masses’ oppression, and thus as a cautionary example for America if the removal of African American oppression fails to materialize (“‘Bigger,’” 12–14 and 18–19). It is in this way, too, that Thomas thinks about totalitarianism—notably after the murder, when his position as a free agent is already established and now requires him to choose a direction to take (NS, 144–45). Totalitarianism is thus a consequence of oppression and not its cause. Instead, the essentialist and progressivist models of civilization are cited as the ideological sources of oppression in Native Son. Significantly, these models are not used
to describe the American way of life enjoyed by whites, but only to explain the exclusion of African Americans from that way of life.

These two harmful European models are represented by Mr. and Mrs. Dalton. The Daltons are personally responsible for much of the oppression in the narrative universe of *Native Son*. Their role as the main representatives of illegitimate oppression is especially emphasized by their unfolding status as the victims of an attack whose pain, it is suggested, is the result of poetic justice. Even though Thomas does not select his victims based on their guilt against the oppressed, the author does and, in this way, presents Thomas’s crimes as redemptive actions. Of course, the Daltons are not the only agents of illegitimate oppression in the novel; representatives of the press and the judicial system also play the role of such agents, as do a private detective, various police officers and prison guards, white vigilantes, and the members of the Ku Klux Klan who terrorize Chicago’s black neighborhoods (known as the Black Belt) during Thomas’s trial. All of these characters combined represent an “older society” that collectively oppresses African Americans, has imprinted itself on their minds, and renders them outsiders who always relate to, but are never included in, the nation (*NS*, 251, 385, 412, 419, and 420). Still, all of these minor oppressive characters are derived from the characterization of the Daltons, since they interact with Thomas only on behalf of this particular victimized family.

Mr. Dalton’s perspective corresponds to the essentialist model of civilization. He is heavily invested in the notion of racist segregation and economic and social discrimination against African Americans, capitalizing on the divide between African Americans and whites, reinforcing it, and encouraging its institutional reproduction (*NS*, 87, 184, 194, 324–25, 356–58, and 415). Mr. Dalton thus satisfies central assumptions of the essentialist approach—namely, that there is and should be a spatial separation between civilization and racialized Other, that this segregation is based on a fundamental difference in nature, and that the Other must be kept at bay by any means necessary and for the benefit of all. While Mr. Dalton emphasizes his own impartial investment in reason and justice, it is clear in the novel that the blatantly discriminatory actions of other characters and institutions can be traced back to him. For instance, the South Side Real Estate Company, which manages housing in the Black Belt and is responsible for the abominable conditions that Thomas’s family lives in, turns out to be owned by Mr. Dalton (*NS*, 80). Racist segregation is the reason why he is able to amass a fortune independent of his wife’s old money (*NS*, 355–57), and he consciously uses his position as a landlord to pressure African Americans into obedience (*NS*, 332). Also, it is his direct influence that drives the law to extremes in its punishment of Thomas for his crimes (*NS*, 323).
furthermore indicates that Mr. Dalton encourages a reproduction of racist segregation in his employment choices. This is seen not only in Thomas’s job interview (NS, 83) and the discussion of his predecessor’s employment history, but also in the characterization of the extreme and obvious racism and anticommunism exhibited by Mr. Bitten, a private investigator and Mr. Dalton’s trusted employee (NS, 189–91). Bitten is an extension of Dalton, and so—in a weaker and more distanced form—are members of “the press” (NS, 184–85 and 229), who eventually reproduce Dalton’s illegitimate prejudices (NS, 244 and 413).

Mr. Dalton’s blind wife represents the progressivist model of civilization. She is primarily responsible for the couple’s appearance of benevolence (NS, 87). She comes from old money, whose potentially illegitimate appropriation has been naturalized and obscured by time (NS, 344–45, 355–57, and 416) and that provides a superior status reinforced by her involvement in an academically minded charity. Mrs. Dalton demands that her own values be reproduced to the letter by the recipients of her charity (NS, 77). She represents the legacy of the progressivist approach to civilization in the United States, which is destructive in its very piousness and otherworldliness. In this context, one passage is notable: in it, a preacher uses the words “wash them white as snow” (NS, 313) to refer to the kind of solution that the church offers Thomas. Mrs. Dalton and snow are linked throughout the novel; her ghostlike presence is continuously associated with the noiselessness and absolute whiteness of snow, indicating her impersonal, abstract, and hard to detect but nevertheless direct contribution to violence. Indeed, her fundamental misinterpretation of violent situations is dramatic (both in terms of the African Americans she intends to save, and the daughter whose murder she attends but does not witness). Her association with snow is most explicit in the novel’s two murder scenes. Neither Mary nor Mears were killed by Thomas alone: had Mrs. Dalton not entered the room, Thomas would not have smothered Mary (NS, 116–17), and the blizzard that descends on the city during the novel freezes the not-quite-slain Mears to death (NS, 334).

Wright’s choice of a married couple to represent the essentialist and progressivist models of civilization can be viewed as a nod toward the models’ traditional complementarity in American cultural history. Rather than constructing them as alternatives, as Cooper did, Wright characterizes both models as the inseparable, illegitimate products of the past that claim to represent “American civilization” (NS, 403) but in fact stand in the way of that civilization in Turner’s sense (NS, 324–25). The Daltons’ characterization as representative of outdated models of civilization underlines Native Son’s investment in the frontier model that explicitly surpasses the two older models.

Judging from the long list of white characters in Native Son who embrace
oppression, one might be tempted to view the white American way of life as illegitimate and exclusionary by nature. When the state attorney argues that “if this fiend’s life is spared because of such a [frontier model–based] defense . . . we have abandoned the fight for civilization!” (NS, 403), the novel is suggesting that the civilization he means is not worth saving—that it is in fact not civilization at all but rather a “conspiracy against rights”4 exercised by the “older society.” But the novel does not include all whites in this conspiracy, as the importance of Erlone and Max as representatives of civilization indicate. Most centrally, it is Mary Dalton, the privileged offspring of the two illegitimate perspectives, who is the chief representative of a true American way of life. Rather than duplicating her parents’ perspectives, Mary represents a white America that has long been ready for racial integration, despite having been exposed to exclusionary politics for her entire life.

In contrast to her parents, Mary represents a white position toward African Americans that is characterized as legitimate and civilized in the frontier sense. She initiates Thomas’s genesis as a pirata by causing him to relate to a white person for the first time in his life; meeting Mary opens up the no man’s land between African Americans and whites to Thomas and allows him to maneuver in this space, thus setting in motion the characteristic stages of pirata transformation (NS, 96–98). The political statements that Mary makes before she dies mirror the underlying politics of the novel. She expresses a serious and open-minded interest in the perspectives and lives of African Americans; it is she who initiates Thomas’s integration into her own circle (NS, 83 and 96), who acknowledges as well as challenges the separate experiences of blacks and whites (NS, 101), who actively—though very clumsily—tries to understand African American life and African American perspectives (NS, 92 and 108), who senses her own unwitting transgressions against Thomas and apologizes for them (NS, 103), and who is determined to integrate African Americans into the political process as equals of whites (NS, 108). Unlike Mr. Dalton, who views African Americans as innocents whose exclusion and exploitation is natural; Mrs. Dalton, who sees them as empty vessels to be filled; or Erlone, who—before his epiphany—is primarily interested in recruiting the African American masses for the revolution, Mary is willing to meet African Americans on their own terms and in the context of their own history, and to make this approach the basis of her political activism. Mary’s position as a representative of the American way of life is included in the characterization of Max as Thomas’s primary spokesperson: Max is first mentioned in a conversation between Mary and Erlone that suggests one of Mary’s central political contributions is to finance Max’s work (NS, 107). Her death is also the reason for Erlone’s epiphany and his determination to imitate Mary’s perspective.
The central tragedy of oppression, Wright suggests, is that it primarily kills the true Americans on both sides of the fence. On the white side, the American is Mary; on the African American side, it is the Thomas of the last pages of the novel, who has been sentenced to die at the very moment when he has completed his transformation into an American in Turner’s sense and might thus begin a softening process in his own right (NS, 443–45). Both are doomed to death, but it is important that the agent of destruction that is able to become a meaningful pirata is not the white woman, but the African American man; in this way, the foundational disruption becomes meaningful in the context of race.

During the section of the novel that presents Thomas’s trial, then, the oppressive hostility of the “older society” becomes fully explicit as “an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life” (NS, 419), an action that follows the frontier model and helps continue the foundational history of the American nation (NS, 424–25). In this spirit, the softening process represented by Max and Erlone causes a reinterpretation of the law. Max says to Thomas’s judge: “I ask you to recognize the laws and processes flowing from such a condition of [naturalized systemic oppression], understand them, seek to change them. If we do none of these, then we should not pretend horror or surprise when thwarted life expresses itself in fear and hate and crime” (NS, 417). Max renders the Thomas’s motives legitimate without embracing the violence that has made these motives visible to the law. He argues that the possibility of a prison sentence for Thomas is the legitimate basis for its softening process of the law. The pirata’s physical violence is thus transformed into the violence implied in the letter and practice of the law (Cover, “Violence,” 203). Both forms of violence are characterized as neutral tools that can have either legitimate or illegitimate interpretation—as in Dashiell Hammett’s Red Harvest, it is violence, rather than the oppression of innocents (W. Brown, States of Injury, 181), that becomes depoliticized in Native Son. In this way, Wright can expose the rule of law as illegitimate in its service to the “older society” and still point to it as a possible way to integrate African Americans into the nation.

In the most explicit evocation of the frontier thesis as a structuring model for Native Son, Wright explicitly returns to the spatial dimension of segregation, which serves as the central reference for the novel’s use of the hostis humani generis constellation. According to Max, Thomas’s violence makes the racialized boundaries of the city visible; he points out that such segregation contradicts the national mission of America as the epitome of a second stage of civilization in the world. In the conversation between Max and Thomas that concludes the novel, Max points to the urban landscape outside the prison window and says:
Those buildings sprang up out of the hearts of men, Bigger. Men like you. Men kept hungry, kept needing, and those buildings kept growing and unfolding. You once told me you wanted to do a lot of things... What you felt, what you wanted, is what keeps those buildings standing there. When millions of men are desiring and longing, those buildings grow and unfold. But, Bigger, those buildings aren’t growing any more. A few men are squeezing those buildings tightly in their hands. The buildings can’t unfold, can’t feed the dreams men have, men like you... The men on the inside of those buildings have begun to doubt, just as you did. They don’t believe any more. They don’t feel it’s their world. They’re restless, like you, Bigger. They have nothing. There’s nothing through which they can grow and unfold. ... The men who own those buildings are afraid. They want to keep what they own, even if it makes others suffer. ... But men, men like you, get angry and fight to re-enter those buildings, to live again. (NS, 451)

As Max’s monologue indicates, foundational rebirth and the redrawing of the essentialist divide between oppressors and oppressed are translated into a fundamental reformulation of urban space; at the same time, the restructuring of that space serves as a metaphor for the more profound restructuring of the law. Max characterizes the struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed as a struggle that might, at first glance, appear to be essentialist: “On both sides men want to live; men are fighting for life. Who will win? Well, the side that feels life the most, the side with the most humanity and the most men” (NS, 452). At this point of the novel, however, this struggle has already been transferred from the realm of physical violence into the realm of the law. It is no longer fought by the pirata Thomas, who has already been sentenced to death, but by the integrated representatives of civilization Max and Erlone, who have come to understand the real reasons behind the violence and who are now able to call for political and legal reform on the basis of this understanding (NS, 318–19).

The essentialist formulation of the struggle between oppressors and oppressed has thus been transformed from a violent political confrontation into a debate about the legal interpretation of agency. The United States as a segregated realm has been translated into a universal no man’s land of collective potential to overcome oppression. As Max’s comments also indicate, the oppression of African Americans is just one particularly obvious and tangible form of oppression among the many in Native Son. While the group of “his [African American] people” remains the most explicit group represented by Thomas in the novel, his transformation into a free and normatively defiant agent engages Thomas in the discourse of “pure” legal representation (Tuitt, “Violence,” 203; see also Boyd-White, “Language”).
The novel renders any struggle against oppression and the American civilizational model of disruptive rebirth analogous and equivalent (excluding—ironically, considering that the pure woman paradox underlies this construction—the battle of gender equality).

The reader is called on to join Max and Erlone in their normative interpretation of Thomas’s violence. This interpretation, as Wright indicates throughout the novel as well as in his commentary on it, is made possible by the conscious inclusion of any international dimension, both in the novel and in the expectations of its readership. I have suggested that the frontier model always implicitly depends on the essentialist model to be meaningful. This is because the defining foundational moment of violence cites an essentialist clash that points outside of the space of the law, as well as the space of the nation within which this law is relevant. The pirata can become an entity in an in-between zone that defines the nation, thus making perpetual self-actualization conceivable, only if the nation as a whole is situated in an essentialist struggle that formulates certain properties of civilized order as universally accepted inside the nation and that clusters an illegitimate set of properties outside it. It is only this greater, always international, and always necessarily essentialist struggle that stabilizes the normative boundaries that the pirata renegotiates inside the nation. In Turner, this essentialist struggle is waged between Europe and Native Americans. *Native Son*, published one year before the United States entered World War II, is informed by the essentialist construction of war against totalitarian regimes as a struggle taking place outside of the United States.

Only as long as the boundaries between the domestic and the international are maintained, and as long as the US nation-state can be considered only peripherally affected by the essentialist conflict that maintains it as a stable in-between zone, can the pirata assume the position of a figure that may represent a genuinely American way of life—or perhaps more specifically, a genuinely American way of interpreting the law on the basis of constitutive violence.

The US engagement in World War II, however, which went hand in hand with the widespread use of the phrase “American century,” changed this precarious distinction between the national and the international. In his discussion of “American century” as a term first used by Henry Luce in an editorial in *Life* editorial in 1941, David Harvey writes: “It had long been an influential principle of political thought and practice in the United States . . . that foreign entanglements should be avoided because they would undermine democracy at home. The difficulty was to bridge the gap between this fear and the obvious fact of US global domination [especially during and after World War II]. Much as European imperialism had turned to racism to
bridge the tension between nationalism and imperialism, so the US sought to conceal imperial ambition in an abstract universalism” (Neoliberalism, 50). Elizabeth Borgwardt adds that US security politics had always contained an element of the international, yet “traditional antinomies such as ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ affairs have become increasingly obsolete in the study of the politics and ideas of the World War II era” (New Deal, 9).

The dissolution of the national-international distinction also threatened the possibility of separating national (frontier) from the international (essentialist) constructions of civilization as an order with an inherent ability to commit legitimate violence. The problematic implications of “abstract universalism” (which went hand in hand with a covert essentialist claim to represent civilization violently) were not visible at first because the reference to universalist values had immediate democratizing effects within the United States. In respect to the “abstract universalism” in the context of the Atlantic Charter that defined the war objectives of the Allies in 1941, Borgwardt explains: “The high-toned abstractions in the Atlantic Charter, intended to contrast Anglo-American principles with those of the Third Reich, inevitably served to highlight internal contradictions and hypocrisies within democracies themselves” (ibid., 8; see also Baldwin, “Down at the Cross,” 52–53 and 93).

Only because the self-evident primacy of such universalist principles and the inherently illegitimate nature of the totalitarian antagonist were uncontested in the United States could authors like Wright address these contradictions in terms of the frontier model of the civilization and be understood as the pioneers of a civil rights struggle that worked to reduce inequalities in democracies. The narrative strategies of Native Son (which focus on the constitutional promise of equality) anticipate the tendency of social movements to naturalize certain specific legal bodies and the “spirit of the law” that they epitomize (Waldron, “Torture,” 1748, see also ibid., 1681–750) as the epitomes of civilization as well.

It is important to underline that, to sustain itself as a meaningful model of civilization, the frontier model relied on the creation of legal bodies of text that epitomized civilization: wherever they are implemented, civilization exists. The US Constitution had long been seen as such a text, and a similar status was bestowed on the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (Borgwardt, New Deal; Slaughter, Human Rights Inc.). In 1960s and 1970s especially, the US Constitution and the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (UDHR) are read as spiritually related civilized rules set down for a humanity that has to work hard to implement them in the frontier model’s sense. Even though both the Constitution and the UDHR can be altered and amended, their very existence is hailed as a sign
of civilized humanity that can be relied on to formulate an inherently legitimate legal order in a future that combines the violence of disruptive piratae and the structural reforms made by representatives of civilization.

However, as the next part of this book will show, there is a crucial problem with the emerging consensus that all nations, including the United States, are not inherently civilized but only have civilizational potential, which is actualized by their perpetual rebirth within the parameters of central legal bodies of text. As the possibility of producing the innocent in Scarry’s argument and Bigger Thomas’s short contemplation of totalitarianism as a possible path indicate, alternatives to civilization exist: totalitarianism and, after the end of the Cold War, Islam, understood in Samuel Huntington’s reductive sense of a “civilizational war” between spatialized cultures (*Clash of Civilizations*, 247).