

MASTER'S RESEARCH REPORT

Violence and Resistance in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945)

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DECLARATION

I, Sandra Yeukai Magogo, declare that this research is my own, unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in African Literature by Coursework and Research Report at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other university.

NAME.....Sandra Yeukai Magogo.....

Signature 

DEDICATION

To my husband, Dr Maposa, my boys, Paul and Michael and my brother, Harold. Thank you for your support through this journey.

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Firstly, I want to thank the Lord Jesus Christ for the gift of life and for giving me the strength and understanding to pull through.

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INTRODUCTION

Aim

This study unpacks the relationship between colonial violence and counter-violence as implicitly or explicitly addressed in these texts. The core aim of this study was to provide insight into Richard Wright's position on the fundamental ideological and political functions of violence as a tool for establishing and maintaining white supremacy and as a creative energy deployed by blacks for self-preservation. This research aims to unveil, through critical analysis of the two texts *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, the true nature of the message of violence in its relationship to the idea of resistance. The contests for survival between blacks and whites are shown as defined by racial conflicts rendering one group superior while the other stays inferior and oppressed.

Rationale

A critical analysis of Wright's texts, *Native Son* and *Black Boy* frees the discourse from the reactionary dogma which equates white people's violence on blacks with civilization and resistance by black people with pure evil. A close examination of these texts helps to show the relationship between the use of violence and power in America where contests for survival between blacks and whites are defined by racial conflict rendering one group superior while the other stays inferior and oppressed. The main purpose for using Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* was that both novels are considered seminal in the history of African-American literature, and they reveal the struggles of African-Americans against all forms of oppression. These texts are still areas fertile with new insights into how violence can be discreetly or explicitly used as a form of resistance. Richard Wright's writings exposed, as no one before had, the hostility, anxiety, and violence that have severely damaged and may still dismantle our culture. His impact on American literature was enormous and he is considered the most significant black novelist. His publication of these two texts marked a watershed moment in the depiction of twentieth-century racial prejudice and its repercussions. The way he illustrated subjugation and violence which was prevalent during the era he was growing up, was applaudable. He was one of the key African-American writers to openly describe the brutalities

affiliated with Jim Crow regulations, and racial prejudice in the American South. He became a pioneer who led the fight against African-American violence in America. For Richard Wright, violence was an inevitable way in the process of affirming one's dignity.

This study was thus premised upon the need to explore ways in which he unleashes the influence of fictional expression to condemn, strategize, revolutionize, and envision possibilities where all Americans will not depend upon the practices of violence and marginalization of African Americans anymore. Although a lot of attention has been placed on the 20-year-old Bigger Thomas' act of killing in *Native Son* including numerous theories being put forth, it is important to study and analyze how Wright draws us to the complexities that are embedded in the violence by black men. In this study, I have taken off the layers to reveal the actual meaning and intent of Wright's 'violence' as implicit and explicit.

Literature Review

A review of other literary and academic work is critical to this research as it grounded the main arguments of violence being an outlet; counter-violence, and not a representation of an entire class. In this respect, Schostak and Schostak (2013), point out that it also strengthens the study. As O'Leary in *The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project* (2010:71) the review of other literature posits that "the production of new knowledge is fundamentally dependent on past knowledge" (36). This study has explored other literature in re-examining the message in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. Richard Wright establishes that violence is an outlet and a critical component in resisting the status quo of a class battle. As violence and class battles are an ongoing field of study, some scholars continue attacking Wright's 'gross' depiction of excessive use of violence as being representative of all black men. Wright views violence as necessary and demonstrative of the African persona's only outlet during the period and setting the characters find themselves. He also sees violence as a creative force for achieving identity and self-recognition. It is no doubt that Wright is one of the significant African writers of the 20th century, his influence was profound. This is supported by Arnold Rampersad (1995 p.11) who says, "Perhaps, the most significant and influential" African American author of the 20th century was Richard Wright. Another review is from the *New York Times of November* (18, 1947), Ralph Thompson, wrote that *Black Boy* was "A more eloquent and belligerent statement of its kind... a

stinging indictment of American attitudes toward the Negro over a period of 300 years." As this proposal reviews more of what other scholars have said about Richard Wright, his creative expressions of representations of options the black men had at the time are incredible. Even Wright's well-known critic, James Baldwin, viewed him as his spiritual father and he referred to his work as, "a roadblock in my road, the sphinx whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself" (Alas 259, 256). Though Elveli (2020) argues that the theme of violence pervades Wright's works, many scholars still confirm that in these two texts, *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, he is hailed for his deep understanding of the plight of blacks in America.

However, Fabre (1985) argues that Wright is sometimes criticized for invoking shocking violent scenes in his works. For example, Evans (1981) levels a scathing attack on Wright arguing that Richard Wright misrepresented the lives of black people by confirming white racist stereotypes such as laziness and violence. Takaki, in *Violence in the Black Imagination*, supports Evans (1981) when he states that "Historians have in many cases been able to see blacks only as they wished to see them only as servile, lazy, and happy or only as defiant, discontented and rebellious" (p. 214). The negative reception is not unique to *Black Boy*. David Daiches complained in a subsequent review that *Native Son's* thesis, "was seriously undercut because the killing of Mary Dalton was so violent and unusual, a melodramatic action which was too bizarre to verify the book's claims about the general conditions of blacks in America" (95). Baldwin claimed that Richard Wright failed to provide an adequate portrayal of character and theme, reducing both to simplistic formulae. Echoing Baldwin's view, Scott complained that Wright's obsession with the "raging abysses of violent criminality" forced him to practice a terrible brutalization upon his characters (19). Even though Bigger Thomas' violence might be seen, and regarded as outrageous, Wright however presents him in a more complex manner. He is an African American who is trapped in a world that compels him to only choose two similarly degrading choices which May describes 'as a disorienting empathy and a destructive violence' (12). Given the grim demands of such a world, it is no small triumph for Bigger to establish a human vision of himself, however fragile that vision may be. Wright's excessive depiction of violence in *Native Son* therefore according to Robert Butler is neither gratuitous nor sensationalistic. Rather it is a "powerful reflector of both the central character's drive for self-hood and the social environment which is intent on wasting that drive by forcing Bigger into a vacuum where there is no relatedness" (23).

In an *Afterword to the edition of Native Son*, John Reilly accuses Wright of reinforcing white stereotypes about blacks. He observes:

Richard Wright inverts the pitiful and familiar story of the black man as a victim, making the Negro is the violent attacker and seems thereby to confirm the white man's fantasies of assault and rape. The victims of Bigger Thomas' violence are a white woman with liberal feelings on the Negro question and Bigger's lover. The story is thus calculated to show Bigger Thomas as a man brutalized and depraved beyond ordinary humanity (393).

Here, Reilly suggests a transformation of Bigger, once scared of white people, now committing gruesome murder of seemingly defenseless women. Reilly also shows Bigger to be uncreative but rather inevitably, a by-product of environmental forces, and the reader is prepared to accept violence by black people as one of the many stereotypes that obscures their reality and taints their image. Furthermore, Evans (1981) avers that violence committed in *Native Son* reinforces the negative stereotypes of blacks as violent, sexist, and sadistic. He argues, "There is violence enough in *Native Son*, but it is senseless violence of black on black or senseless violence against women, sleeping and dead. (33)" After rightly pointing out that the oppressive segregation in America created people like Bigger Thomas, this criticism of Richard Wright as a disciple of violence seems largely unfair; how does Bigger's self-defense become "senseless?" Thus, this research aimed to discuss that, to take Evans' and Reilly's view is to miss the ironic presentation of violence and its bastardization by Bigger Thomas. What Evans (1981) and Reilly (1996) do not investigate is: if killing two defenseless women is wrong, what about the enslavement, the colonization, the killing, and the discrimination of blacks? To this, JanMohamed's appreciation of Wright's works shows how living under persistent threat of physical violence and death influenced the writer's main characters and how killing provides avenues of freedom from fear of death.

Thus, Evan's and Reilly's criticism of the use of violence in Richard Wright's works ignores the conception that the author's protagonists do not invent violence or killing, they are just redeploying it. Fabre denies a piecemeal response to Wright's works arguing that an incomplete criticism would portray Wright, "as a lean, hungry, angry, young man who spit out *Native Son* and *Black Boy* as a protest against the racism that crippled his early life" (*New York Times*, Oct

7, 1973). West agrees with this assertion when he notes that *Native Son* is an attempt to depict the psychological dramas that occur when a denigrated black subject interacts with a white world "with no room for black space, place or face that feeds on a black future lessness and black hopelessness" (101). Thus, Bigger's life is a mystery, a paradox that one must unveil to understand the reason why he is subservient. From West's viewpoint, the way Wright plotted his text presents different reactions and relations to blackness from within a black experience. Again, we continue to view how Richard Wright's work was shocking to the senses at the time to other schools of thought who only saw the violence but not the intended meanings embedded in the plot. Calling for a holistic approach to Wright's works, Fabre writes, "Literature and politics were two equally indispensable tools in the service of humanism. This is why I insist upon judging Wright's work, not separating his writing from its ideological framework, and not making a split, only artificially justified by his exile, in the unfolding of his career. It is only by respecting this unity in its ideological, racial, and historical context that Wright's importance can be fairly evaluated" (78). On this basis, Fabre dispenses unwarranted negativity towards Wright's works by claiming that the unfair criticisms such as that of Evans and Reilly were based on incomplete analysis. The further reading of what other scholars viewed the depictions of Wright in his work, striking is Meachem's (1945) view as cited in Evans (1981 p. 115) who concedes that *Black Boy* was "factually told at encyclopedic length in the histories and learned journals of the social sciences, but it has needed a more poignant recital in the voice of the folk themselves, Richard Wright has become this voice. "It is evident through a critical reading of *Black Boy* (1945) and *Native Son* (1940), that Richard Wright, "depicted the structure of a society created and maintained by direct, brutal violence" (Wilmot 2009 p. 18).

The gross violence being perpetrated on black bodies in that society at the time required creative ways of resistance that had to be employed by these alienated individuals. Richard Wright recalls his life experiences and his interactions with his community during the segregation Jim Crow period. Through the narrative and prosaic elements of the texts under study, the reader learns about Richard Wright's hurtful childhood, part of which is the basis for his scathing attack on injustice. Thus, *Black Boy* reflects the theme of counter-violence. At one point, the narrator's mother said, "I'm going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself" (self-defense). It is the idea of self-defense that this investigation was interested in but not only at the 'personal' level. This study has extended the idea of counter-violence to societal or nationwide resistance

against all forms of oppression – economically, socially, and politically. Wright views counter-violence as self-defense. In *The Projection of Racism in Richard Wright's Black Boy*, SADEQ (2016 p. 65) agrees that "Violence is a prominent theme in the novel *Black Boy*." SADEQ's paper focused much on proving that *Black Boy* is a novel of violence. Though violence became topical in SADEQ's study, the theme of violence is not directly linked to the theme of resistance. During the Jim Crow era, black people were brutally treated and simple harmless actions like staring at white people in the eye were unlawful. They could be brutally punished in the form of severe battering, forced detentions, and even lynching. Even minor offenses, such as looking a white person in the eye, were punishable by law. Forced arrests, severe beatings, and bob-lynching were among the harsh punishments. The aesthetic elements of the text in SADEQ's view are 'unacceptable' in respect to the violence in its totality however then fails to establish the purposes of it or uses it in the context of the setting and plot.

Therefore, this study intended to debunk these negative readings of Wright's works and submit that the characters of *Black Boy* and *Native Son* and his methods of writing and language do have a message of resistance based on the use of violence as a creative and a symbolic act available to the oppressed. In line with the above disposition, Fabre writes in defense of Richard Wright: "Social criticism that emerges from *Black Boy* invites us to consider Wright mostly as a victim of racial discrimination in its violent or subtle manifestations or as an embattled young man, determined to surmount the barriers of prejudice and poverty" (4). He further contends that after reading *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Frantz Fanon "found in it not only a clear depiction of racial oppression in the United States but also a springboard toward the concept of revolutionary violence" (4). Fabre's views of Wright's work are key here because they somehow link violence to the idea of revolution. The idea of revolutionary violence is articulated in Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1962). To the oppressed, violence is "de-intoxicating" and is the last course of action in response to widespread racial oppression and dehumanization of blacks by white systems. Shatz (2021) observes that Frantz Fanon's reading of *Native Son* examined the violent impulses created by racism in its victims, the oppressed. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon observed,

"Bigger Thomas ... is afraid, terribly afraid. But afraid of what... of himself? We don't yet know who he is, but he knows that fear will haunt the world once the world finds out." Fanon here

seems to justify Wright's presentation of violence in *Native Son* as he understands that this extent of antipathy and inexorable fear is a psychopathically disparaging power. Bigger is ensnared in a coil of extremely destructive reactions that drive him to act viciously to end the tension he feels.

Elveli (2020) proposes that violence has been used in Richard Wright's works both as a theme and a device to show the suffering of his people. He further argues that Richard Wright deploys his texts to highlight the effects of violence on African Americans both physically and psychologically, the central argument being that white men's racism and violence turn blacks into non-human beings. The dehumanizing effect of oppression is vividly explored in Aime Césaire's "*Discourse on Colonialism*" where he argues that colonial racism which thrives on hatred and despise for the native, tends to dehumanize both the colonizer and the colonized. Césaire wrote about the colonizer: "To ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustomed himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal" (144). The vision of black people as animals is used to justify genocidal acts committed under colonial racism. In *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, Wright focuses on how the apocalypses and physical violence destroy black lives. The writer, who deploys himself as the narrator, indicates that the oppressed have common features marked by dehumanization, degradation, humiliation, pain, anger, and domestic violence developed through decades of 'orientalized' self-hatred. It is upon this notion that Wright could be characterized as one of the writers who deployed literary creativity in his texts to reconstruct and restructure the lived and felt experiences of African-Americans in discriminatory American society. Taken as political and social narratives, the selected texts could be vehicles through which the writer depicts violence as an intrinsic value of American society used as a form of power over blacks for centuries.

To restructure the power dynamics in society, Wright arms his black characters with violence to give them a fighting chance. For example, in his presentation of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, as one critic points out, "Wright had Bigger kill the girl (Mary) rather than make love to her because, to his contemporaries, interracial violence was more acceptable than interracial intimacy" Reed (1978 p. 46). Wilmot (2009) concurs: "The natives had to recognize that colonial society was "violence in its natural state"; they must recognize that violence reduced them to "natives"; by recognizing the role of violence in dehumanizing them, they rediscovered their

suppressed humanity; with this heightened political consciousness they reversed the role of violence from an instrument of suppression to one of national liberation; because of the colonial system which deprived the masses of culture and education, the intellectual played a major role in developing the new consciousness; but the intellectual must never forget that the people are the ones to be educated, that this was their struggle, and that liberating violence was necessary for the overthrow of the colonial society formed and maintained by the violence of suppression (2009 p. 21).

Here, Wilmot's views on Wright's *Native Son* exude violence as a form of rebellion against institutional violence. Babatunde (1996) claims that Wright created violent and dangerous black characters as a revolutionary way to resist the same. This makes Wright "a black person who was not simply hurt, outraged, or terrified by United States racism, but also as a courageous black intellectual memorially informed by racial wisdom he acquired during his life under the aegis of *Southern Jim Crow* and northern red-lining and racist political assaults" (Babatunde 1996 p. 14). Michel Fabre proposes that Richard Wright's interpretation of the racial conflict in the American South was a by-product of his exposure to the criminology, psychology, and psychiatry of contemporary American literature. He argues that *Black Boy* is Richard Wright's revolt against the discourse of the American South (Fabre, 1985: 89) with Wright's autobiography revealing personal and communal hardships faced by the Negro boys and families. Streater (1946), for example, regards *Black Boy* as a text of black propaganda. He writes:

"There is no need to say that the book is propaganda, for it is. But what is not? And why should we not have good propaganda, after four centuries of vicious propaganda to make life easy for white folks who have bled and exploited black folks?" (204).

In Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death, JanMohamed (2005) concludes *Native Son*, "is entirely dedicated to and determined, aesthetically and ideologically, by Wright's desire to unveil the unconscious structures of the dialectics of death by which Bigger is produced, bound, and motivated, structures that have been in place throughout slavery and Jim Crow society but have not been adequately unveiled before Wright's attempt." The idea communicated by JanMohamed (2005) is that the threat of death is a persistent condition hanging over the lives of Wright's characters. Richard Wright's literary texts do have

protagonists and antagonists who use violence, threat of violence, and death as tools of individual and social control. Hence, this study was interested in showing Wright's attitudes towards the use of violence in the societies he lived as contexts for his works. It is crucial to argue whether the author is in defense of violence or not. Are there instances in which the writer sympathizes with anti-racial violence? It was pertinent to assess the position of Wright as a protest writer, champion of the black struggles for equality, and the voice of resistance against racial abuse of African-Americans. In his defense plea, Bigger Thomas's lawyer in *Native Son*, says, "He was living, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live. The actions that resulted in the death of those two women were as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one's eye. It was an act of creation." (*Native Son* p. 366).

Donald Gibson also argues that critics of Wright frequently fail to understand Bigger in ways that reflect his indistinctness from the perception of whites especially because they ignore Bigger's capability for individual agency inside the variations of Chicago. Surprisingly, this inability to see Bigger's evasion could indicate that these scholars are participating either in an ideology of anti-blackness that negates the constructive power of black people's struggle or that African Americans' determination is weak to be a powerful means of resistance. Violence can be a tool to vent out anger or disgust at the level of socioeconomic stagnation, poverty, and problems of identity among other social and political foibles. This study intended to locate the place and role of violence in the literary works of Richard Wright which can be done by assessing the extent to which the oppressed were victims of the white system. *Native Son* and *Black Boy* could be seen as a rallying cry for social and political departure from personal, social, and institutional violence against African-Americans. Wright's portrayal of setting, characterization, and language constitute grounds on which to study the message of resistance against capitulating to historical political and largely, economic demands of white slavery, colonialism, racism, and exclusionary tactics. In both texts, it appears violence has a significant function or is a positive force that allows characters to overcome indifference and explore their own identities as human beings. It was incumbent upon this study to analyze the texts to decipher Richard Wright's use and treatment of violence. Thus, this study was premised upon the need to explore how Richard Wright unleashes the power of literary expression to condemn, maneuver, revolutionize, and visualize prospects where all Americans never again depend upon the culture of violence and marginalization of African-Americans.

Theoretical Framework

To meet the objectives of this study, that of locating the relationship between violence and resistance in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, the analysis relied on two theoretical strands which are, the *Marxist Literary Criticism* and the concepts of "Counter violence" from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Paulo Freire's "Dehumanization" is discussed in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). *The Marxist Literary Criticism* is here considered as the theoretical basis for the critical analysis of the selected texts while dehumanization and counter-violence are definitive conceptual bases relevant to the explanation of selected works and direction for the study. *Marxism* theory believes that social revolution is inevitable, and it is violent. According to this concept, history is a collection of class struggles over the means of production; whoever gets to control the productive resources also controls society and can impose their viewpoints on the underclasses. According to Grinnell (145), Wright envisions communism in the United States capable of replicating patterns of social dehumanization that banish Bigger into the darkened role of what Wright once paradoxically referred to as 'the Negro's uncertain position in America.' The central issue confronting Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* is the power struggle.

In this study, a Marxist interpretation reads *Black Boy* and *Native Son* as expressions of class struggle. Again, Marxist literary criticism was used to present a clearer view of the character's struggles and their outlets in social and political contexts. It was used to examine the power struggle between the texts' main social groups - the poor, downtrodden blacks, capitalist and strong whites, and communist reds. The Marxist critique of capitalism points out ways in which capitalist modes of production take power from the worker within production. That is why Max argues that Bigger together with other African Americans' inferiority and violence were a result of the conditions they were forced to live under desperation and inferiority- whites can exert control over blacks by determining where they live. According to Barksdale and Kinnamon (1972), African-American violence in the South of America is caused by punitive conditions, prejudiced attitudes, economic hardship, household dissolution, and a lack of education. The defining factor that separates the power of the black and white classes is money. However, the access to money is based on preconceived notions about race. No white person wants to hire a black man to do a professional job because they are frightened that he will either steal or destroy

something valuable. These stereotypes prevented blacks from earning a substantial amount of money, limiting the amount of power they could achieve as a class. This led to some blacks stealing from white people, reinforcing stereotypes of blacks being thieves, and perpetuating the cycle. Reading these texts through the lens of political unconscious and criticality opened the way for acknowledging a history that lies beneath *Black Boy* and *Native Son*; a historical background in which class struggle attains a climax and blacks are subjugated and compelled to be slaves to the dominant white community. For Marx and Engels (1965) crime was simply the product of unjust and alienating social conditions "the struggle of the isolated individual against the prevailing conditions' (p. 367). This became known as the primitive rebellion hypothesis, one of the best modern statements of which is Bohm's: "Crime in capitalist societies is often a rational response to the circumstances in which people find themselves" (2001 p. 115).

In Critical Criminology, alienation (Smith & Bohm, 2008) is a condition that describes the distancing of individuals from something. Karl Max therefore believes that many people in capitalist societies were alienated from work, and this led to alienation from themselves and others. Marx believed that work is at the core of human needs, and it distinguishes humans from animals. Humans consciously create their environment instead of just submitting to it. Alienation therefore according to Smith is the result of this discord between one's species being and one's behavior. He further argues that when humans are divorced and alienated, from themselves, others, and society, they may treat and see others as simple 'things' that can be subjugated, and mistreated because they are also exploited and subjugated by the capitalist system. Most workers therefore do not feel that their labor is a productive endeavor, they are rather degraded traditionalists.

According to Bonger, the fundamental causes of criminality reside in capitalism's oppressive and dehumanizing conditions, yet certain people are more vulnerable to criminality than other people due to differences in "innate social sentiments" altruism and its opponent, apathy. Because capitalism depends on the struggle for important resources, Bonger argued that it breeds selfishness. As a result, capitalist countries affect everyone in different ways. Some may be susceptible to criminal activity, the poor out due to financial need, and the affluent out of pure greed. For Bonger, unemployment was a key driver of misconduct, but it did so through its impacts on the structure of families and poor parental supervision of their children. Other

Marxists attacked Bonger for emphasizing the household system but he strongly felt that only shifting humanity out of capitalism is the only feasible way to reclaim altruism while decreasing crime. Violent offenders are always portrayed as acting outside of moral boundaries, and violence itself is frequently dismissed as unreasonable and subject to simplistic explanations. According to Fanon, colonial authority is sustained via violence and persecution. Having violence as a prerequisite for colonial control, it stands to reason that only the colonizers can comprehend the language of violence. As a result, it is only the execution of violence by those who have been colonized that can properly reconstruct society.

Furthermore, Fanon contends that, psychologically, violence gives the colonized, who have been demeaned, agency to recreate themselves in a light untainted by the colonizers. Sartre refers to these acts of physical violence as "man recreating himself." According to Fanon, violence is necessary for the colonized to politically reorder their environment, recreate themselves as well and resume a self-determining presence. Importantly, challenging the master or authority breaks the harmful cycle of submission and subordination. Thus, Freire (1970) contends that awareness is a critical step in restoring the former oppressed's humanity. Additionally, Freire (1970) argues that re-humanization is prevented by the system of the oppressor and can only be sustained by the oppressed's desire for freedom and regaining lost humanity. According to Malcolm X (1965), black people should protect themselves by using violence when needed. African Americans must employ the same device used by white people. As a result, African Americans will never fight passively for emancipation from whites. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Freire explains that the behavior of the white man is savage and seeks to dominate the oppressed using violent means. This therefore causes the oppressed to develop a negative attitude towards life, causing him to ruin his life and that of others. This research sought to determine if white-caused violence—whether "colonial" or "racial violence"—has the same effects on those who are oppressed generally and on black people.

Methodology

Textual analysis is applied as a method of gathering data. Sarkar (2017) avers that the word text "comes from the Latin term *texere*, meaning 'to weave' and that in literary criticism, a "text as a linguistic structure woven out of words or signs." Nordquist (2019) defines a text as "a coherent stretch of language that may be regarded as an object of critical analysis." In other words, a text is anything that can be "read" with an interest in unpacking its literary content and its coherent set of signs that transmit some kind of informative message. Studying *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, as narrative texts, took the deployment of literary text analysis which must be understood within the whole context of textual analysis as a technique of data gathering and data scrutiny. Applied in this study to unpack the depiction of violence and resistance, the method focuses on setting, language, narrative, choice of words, imagery, perception of the writer, characterization, and organization of the text (plot) as well as meaning. While literary criticism enforces critical judgment, textual analysis examines the style and integrates it with the social meaning to uncover the unconscious social framework of reference (Hall, 1975). The rigorous approach of textual analysis is maintained through the extensive use of literary proof to back up the conclusion reached.

Textual analysis as a method of gathering and analyzing data in academic research involves close reading, interpretation, and exegesis. According to Nicolas (2021), this approach is used to gather data for analysis from a particular text. When collecting the data for analysis a researcher needs to look keenly at the text to identify its content, elements, the writer's context, and its message. Therefore, the text is the means to the study. The text in this sense is not what the researcher physically holds but a method of "potentially infinite processes of signification" (Barthes, in Cheney & Tompkins, 1988). Examining text as a means of study is termed decentering the text. The aim of decentering "the text" as an object of study is done for the subjective or cultural forms which it realizes and makes available (Johnson, 1986). To study the data gathered from the text, the researcher opted to appoint content analysis, one of the methods of data analysis employed under textual analysis. Content analysis can be done qualitatively or quantitatively. Qualitative content analysis was used to explore the actual meaning embedded in the texts about the relationship between violence and resistance. In qualitative research, content evaluation is interpretive and necessitates careful reading of the material. According to

qualitative researchers, text can be interpreted in a variety of ways that are context-dependent, subjective, and reflect multiple meanings.

Chapter Outline

This study was organized into two chapters. Chapter one examined *Black Boy*. In his autobiography, Wright manages to understand the complexities of the world surrounding him and illuminates his arduous experience of having to deal with racism in the heart of the South as a black child. Therefore, this chapter paid particular attention to the importance of the South as the geography and literary landscape in the projection of racism and violence, discussing the legacy of Jim Crow, legally and politically. The South as a world of inflexible dichotomy between the subjugated society and the oppressor produces a mirrored relationship where violence by white people and resistance from the blacks, correspond and respond to each other in an astonishing mutual homogeneity. It has also critically analyzed how Wright uses the concept of alienation, the significance of literacy to resist alienation, how literacy develops his characters to ascend out of their social conditions, and how it provides a functional alternative to a life of menial labor.

Chapter two analyzed *Native Son*. It evaluated the concept of Afro-pessimism in relation to blackness as social death as put it by Wright. I have also investigated how Whites see the black body as non-human without citizenship, how it was reduced to appurtenance and therefore malleable to exploitation and exchangeability. The chapter has scrutinized how a black person who has been dispossessed of a body became an image of brutality and regulation of life by white hegemony. This helped to explore how the world is organized by anti-blackness and how this has created a possibility of enslaving and oppressing blacks. In this kind of conceptualization, the inherence of black demise is projected before its temporal encounter, therefore, black death and violence became communalized.

CHAPTER 1: THE SOUTH AS THE GEOGRAPHY IN THE PROJECTION OF VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE IN *BLACK BOY* (1945).

BLACK BOY

Black people in America's deep Southern states experienced prejudice and brutality during the 20th century in addition to extreme poverty, starvation, and sickness. Black people's lives were profoundly changed by these encounters. This also applied to Richard Nathaniel Wright. Other academics have critiqued Wright for the violence present in his works. It's critical to determine whether Wright invented the violence they describe or whether it was a by-product of the violence that governed the society he lived in. He was a creation of the Jim Crow South in America, where violence persisted there more extremely and brutally. Wright explores the political, economic, and social environment in the American South where his childhood autobiography *Black Boy* was set. According to Wright, living as an African American in the South means experiencing interdependence, unpredictability, and subjection. Thus, *Black Boy* is a testament to a childhood characterized by deprivation, hostility within the family, hardship, and subjugation. Wright describes a violent family and an antagonistic, racist culture throughout the text, not because it impacts connections between blacks and whites but also because it influences the interaction among African Americans. *Black Boy* highlights the economic and social hardships of African Americans by depicting Wright's upbringing as a black boy in the Jim Crow South. This text might be seen as a critique of racism in the American South and how it affected black people's humanity. It draws attention to the marginalization and exclusion of black people from public life. Additionally, Wright had to resort to crime to generate sufficient funds to leave the South because the chances for economic emancipation were so scarce.

The South

Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, is still viewed as a seminal text in our history. It gives us an understanding of what it was like to be a black person in the American South. The author's tone is like an adult's, but the events described are provided through the eyes of a teenager, with a typical revolutionary mindset and a desire to question the environment. It is crucial to highlight that Wright grew up in the South, and his autobiography is tainted by this impression of the region's brutality, terror, and hardships. He believes that the South is a huge trap that

dehumanizes black residents. The horrors that characterize the desolate terrain of Wright's *Black Boy* include racial hatred, rejection, ignorance, murder, and segregation. Wright, however, strives to achieve self-realization in a culture that is not just oppressive and constrictive, but also fundamentally unfriendly. This conflict is felt on every level, even at the most fundamental level of human survival itself and in his efforts to become a writer.

Wright examined the political and social geography of his home Mississippi, which permitted exclusion and isolation. In the South, that is where "I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others (25)." He implied that racial identity and social relations were generated by a particular system of restricting legal and social practices that had become normalized, notably in the American South. According to Davies, geographical and spatial claims are implicit in the transgression of legal and social attempts at racial exclusion and similar practices of power and privilege. The social, legal, and economic repression of black Americans in the South was still mostly driven by violence. We see Wright starting to be socialized at an early age to the subordinate status of black boy in American culture. That is why Wright according to Michel Fabre, "readily accepted the mystery shrouding his distant family origins with as much detachment as he did the fact that his birth was never officially recorded. He preferred to have come out of nothing" (24). Several direct and indirect methods, notably in the South were employed to exclude black people from participating equally in the hegemonic field. Lynching was used to reinforce the political disenfranchised. Richard received a blow to the head during his teen years for failing to say 'sir'. As a result, "Richard was learning rapidly how to watch white people, to observe their every move, every fleeting expression, how to interpret what was said and what was left unsaid" (174). Thus, violence in the South could be employed as a simple signal of a violation of Jim Crow protocol.

Wright's allegiance to the South had a significant impact on his literary work. According to Davies, black authors from the Deep South employ their physical surroundings to conjure up, define, and envision voluntary subjectivities. They do this by making territorial claims and breaking laws that oppose the practice of racial exclusion as a form of privilege and power. Thus, the South takes center stage in Wright's works as it is where 'the great Iron City' as Wright calls it, his adulthood was shaped, branded, and its 'consciousness annealed'. *Black Boy* is engaged in understanding the meanings and legacies of racism in the South. Jones in his analysis of different

Southern writers found in Wright's writing new narratives about social uncertainty, covert and institutional racism, and communal tensions brought on by racial isolation, economic inequality, and residential segregation. According to Cresswell, the South is a public and international forum where a large number of writers of color have reclaimed not only a multicultural Southern region but a multicultural America. That is why Baldwin, "unexpectedly described Wright as a Mississippi pickaninny, mischievous, cunning, and tough" (77). This seems to be at the bottom of everything he did. The main significance of *Black Boy* comes from its protest racial inequality in the South, which is exemplified by Jim Crow laws and the segregation that the dominant white society imposed on African Americans. Numerous tactics were used by the Jim Crow regime to maintain blacks' inferior status and stop them from clamoring for social equality with whites. They were commonly depicted negatively in myths, clichés, and representations. Ahad Mehervand claims that Jim Crow laws, which aimed to limit blacks to ghettos and the stereotypes created by whites, are mostly responsible for the provocation of violence. According to Wright, blacks' internalization of societal taboos from the Jim Crow era is the cause of their aggression.

Wright shows how Jim Crow regulations impeded black-white relations to an extent that neither side trusted the other and mutual animosity became pathological. In such circumstances, it is logical that black people in the South sought a way out that allowed them to pretend to live a normal life. Michel Fabre notes that most readers cannot escape associating Wright with the South because the tremendous impact of his autobiography, *Black Boy*, lies in his having managed to survive in Mississippi, one of the destitute, racist parts of America. This is a region where blacks were considered worthless and were thus treated in a demeaning way. Wright writes, "I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it." (43). Saunders Redding defines the South as the "America that only negroes know, a ghetto of the soul, a boundary of the mind, a confine of the heart." (48) Thus, the South is the site of traumatic racial memory. It is a geography where intimidation and violence were used to put 'the negro back in his place' by white people who were using a variety of tactics to keep blacks from being full citizens of America. Fanon notes that in the South, "A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening" (31). Exclusion led to the shunning of black people from legal institutions and many mainstream social practices and

resulted in increased violence against them. The many injustices that blacks had to deal with were extreme and often led to violence in the South where a deep anti-black sentiment resided. Wright writes, "Color hate defined the place of black life as below that of white life; and the black man, responding to the same dreams as the white man, strove to bury within his heart his awareness of this difference because it made him lonely and afraid" (239). Blacks were referred to as "niggers" and the whole Southern system reinforced anti-black stereotypes. Therefore, the black community's living conditions during the implementation and enforcement of the segregation laws in the American South should be explored, particularly in Mississippi, the setting for Wright's *Black Boy*.

Davies notes that the South is, "a region historically allowed for the production of structures of power based on its slave economy and white racial hegemony" (24). When Wright was interviewed, he asserts that "Mississippi is only an immense black ghetto, a vast prison where the whites are the jailers, and the Negroes are the prisoners" (33). Throughout the 20th century, the abiding tension in Southern life involved maintaining the separation of races, of black spaces of inferiority and subordination to white domination. He writes about the treatment of blacks on a railroad station, "For the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a white line and a black line" (50). Wright sifted the complexes of the South by bringing to attention its location in black subject formation. Davies notes that he recognizes the 20th century as grounded by the material and unleashed by the spatial. He further goes on to argue that Wright understood that the South is a space imagined as a unitary and exemplary locality, particularly one in which it is possible to chart within fiction the construction of racial identity and racial writing. Furthermore, the South was marked by aggressive capitalism which produced both the hierarchical social structure and the glaring economic and social inequities. As a result, the South as a space structure, molds and pushes Wright to use violence for him to live. Wright demonstrates the violent attitude that African Americans should display and uphold for them to live in an unequal Southern society. From the commencement of slavery until its abolition in the nineteenth century, this region has established realms of production, which in turn organized social connections and created a language of spatial disparity based on race. These realms of production were frequently used to construct race and rank. According to Davies race was deemed an essential and irrefutable marker that determined place. In this regard, the

place is more than a way of identifying a stratum of society or a location, rather it is a mode of observing and understanding the world as Tim Cresswell insists.

With attention focused on the South during this period, it is impossible to ignore the use of race in the formation of place and the demarcation of space. For a black man of Wright's generation, "Mississippi was a geographical no-man's land" (Fabre, 98). The segregated South could not tolerate a black boy with literary ambitions like Wright. Wright illustrates this when he is publicly humiliated and accused at a party of being unruly and they seek to damage his profession by smashing alcohol in his face. Furthermore, when he published his story "*The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre*" in a newspaper, he was practically disowned. Black people's divided social environment hampered their aspirations and shattered their ideas of possibility. Therefore, the South became a space of otherness characterized by racism, segregation, violence, and death. Its strict racist laws were always an impediment to blacks. That is why Wright when he recounted his early life in Mississippi, writes that he had no hope of becoming a professional man as the environment could not allow that. The South is where blacks explicitly clearly labeled status was executed openly and in a violent way. Gramsci argues that Jim Crow society is committed to producing subjects who are extremely constrained into the unconscious by the process of repression. Street signs established the symbol of isolation and classification of the 'subsurface' reducing blacks into explicitly labeled areas corresponding to the psychology of race segregation and racism, from 'for colored to white only.' Wright writes, "When I boarded the train, I was aware that we Negroes were in one part of the train and that the whites were in another" (50).

Thus, according to Davies, the principle underlying the noticeable signs of marginalization and isolation was that blacks would embrace the restrictions and act by their assigned place. The signs became an extravagant warning of the required politics of reaffirming black identity in resistance and, eventually, rebellion. Sibley argues that stereotypes serve in the production of places of exclusion. Therefore, segregation in the South as a practice demonstrates how spatial exclusion functions to maintain social boundaries. Fabre argues that "by laying the blame on the social structure, Wright was making the South, the villain" (10). As a result, the white hegemonic comprehension of black people's position within society, regardless of their socioeconomic status, was always evaluated and scaled about a benchmark of white superiority. Horrell argues

that this gave the regime complete control over black populations and assisted in monitoring the movement of black people (1956). Fabre observes that a black teenager could typically not find sustenance for intellectual growth and emotional blooming in the South of Wright's youth. He further argues that, if he had not left, the famous novelist would have become a sharecropper. A personality battered by the shocks of Southern living would not have been nourished by the small margin of Southern culture (both black and white), which was antagonistic and by itself was not a nurturing setting. He writes, "I sensed that Negro life was a sprawling land of unconscious suffering, and there were but few Negroes who knew the meaning of their lives, who could tell their story" (240). Michel Fabre asserts that the South at the time thus was a place where the Negro through racial oppression, was reduced to a body, and that body is doomed to wither quickly because of economic exploitation. It was also a geographical place where racism reduced blacks to creatures of the earth. Wright writes about his father, "As a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and no hope" (BB 30). Wright seems to have reduced his father's mental universe to that of someone deprived not only of literacy but of tradition insofar as a "creature of the earth" knows neither regret nor hope. Regret and hope to stand for continuity between the past and the future while Nathan Wright was condemned to a flat, repetitive present. Wright confronts us with the trauma of black male vulnerability. For African American individuals, the greater cultural dynamic is that they are supposed to perform in a society that silences, mistreats, and disregards their presence. Franklin notes this phenomenon of black men constantly struggling with the notion that their feelings, ideas personality, and self are valued because racism leads them to feel invisible (1999).

Thus, Wright, curiously, asserted that he desired to make a judgment on his geography. This verdict was that 'the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings.' (Andrews, 2003 p 134). When he moved from the South, that's when he became one of the most successful African American writers of his generation but in the South, he was just like one of them. Michel De Certeau states that every story is a travel story- a spatial practice. To Wright, the story is his movement to a place that made possible a different identity. Wright's migration and growth experience to the North gave him the chance to build a new subjectivity. It enabled the self to be redefined in a new setting and provided the stability of an established institutional framework that supported writing as a job and vocation. Falk (1991) asserts that the discovery and a shift in subjectivity marked the beginning of his labeling himself

a writer and earning his living as a writer. The notion of social status and authority in a setting that was formerly off-limits to blacks is also a social environment that gave a historically marginalized group of people a chance to enter public life and be unapologetically identified as writers. His movement out of Mississippi to the North was ultimately not enough to counter the racism engrained in the society. Therefore, the narrative of mobility initiated in *Black Boy* intimately connects his desire to write, to build his bridge of words from his interior space to the larger external world of blacks is also the desire for location and place, for stability against the constraints manifested in the materiality of segregated Mississippi. Whatever psychic wounds Wright sustained in an emasculating South could for a time be soothed by both physical movement and written production. Thus, his South childhood forced him into an agile and determined search for a place that could fully accommodate and nurture his ambition and vocation.

ALIENATION

Wright's sense of alienation from both white civilization and his people is captured in *Black Boy*. It should be emphasized that Wright and his family did not have a fixed address. He was not a long-term part of the black community, and he only completed one year of middle school before entering the eighth grade. He was always the newcomer in town, and he never got to know his neighbors well enough to develop true friends or foes. This is most likely the source of Richard Wright's sense of alienation and disconnection from one cultural community. Richard's youth was blighted by emotional issues, as detailed in his autobiography *Black Boy*. Wright articulates his struggle for agency despite the numerous components of estrangement that have held him back since the first pages of *Black Boy*. Because of his family's conscientious dedication to a 7th Day Adventist religion that varied dramatically from the tonality of mainstream black Christianity, he feels alienated from other blacks and the white world of Jim Crow Mississippi. He writes, "I had already begun to sense that my feelings varied too far from those of the people around me for me to blab about what I felt" (306). He was alienated from his family members, referring to them as strangers even though they were relatives. He is such an oddity that the

society cannot handle him. He writes, "I was a minor, an uninvited dependent, a blood relative who professed no salvation and whose soul stood in mortal peril" (64).

Wright's connection with his family, particularly his grandmother, was nearly wholly antagonistic. He was always in a lengthy, hard battle with his grandmother's faiths, which forbade him to go to work on Saturday although there was a financial need in the family. He writes, "On more than one occasion she interpreted my mother's long illness as the result of my faithlessness." (64) Her being militantly religious and uneducated, Margaret Wilson did not want Wright to keep novels in the house as she believed fiction was the work of the devil. His family and friends describe this literary education as "the most alien thing conceivable to them"(47). Wright feels at one point the weight of his family's rejection of him more severely when he writes, "It hurt. My loneliness became organic. I felt walled in, and I grew irritable...the cold days dragged mechanically" (48). He then decided to keep the writing ambitions he had to himself after his first experience with publication (Rayson, 2015). He at one point won an argument between him and his grandma when he threatened to leave the house.

Wright was overshadowed by a chronic sense of loneliness because of the white racist society and an antagonistic family. The seemingly infrequent affectionate actions by his mother undoubtedly were of critical importance in cultivating his firm hold on the life's edges to which he was doomed. However, because of her vulnerable situation, Ella's supportive gestures, which, according to JanMohammed, frequently mirror the severe demands of their situation and perpetual survival as bare life, have the consequence of further tying Wright to the dominant Jim Crow tradition of isolation. All through his life, Wright strived to reject what the South represented in his mind, but he also reaffirmed what it had meant to him and how it had shaped him. Self-awareness according to JanMohammed, "becomes the fundamental mode of resistance cultivated by Wright against the fundamental prohibitions of Jim Crow society on himself to contemplate his formation" (149). As a result, he had to flee Southern debasement and marginalization to become a writer, which he was not even supposed to try because he was black.

READING AND WRITING

JanMohamed contends that, while Wright was adequately submerged by pessimism and alienation to be successfully and completely made as an alienated creature, he resisted that formation completely to endure it and live to write about it. Wright writes that "there was a yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon some mysterious journey" (9). This resonates powerfully with Wright's feelings of solitude, subjugation, and fate. his marginalization as a black youngster in the South became the political formation through which Wright as an adult will revolve most of his creative life by producing books about estrangement and oppression of black people. Wright grew up during the darkest days of racial discrimination in the American South. the atrocities he experienced and witnessed ended up being the foundation for his reputation as the most significant author in American literature in the twentieth century.

Wright's imaginative mind was sparked by his formative surroundings. Fighting meant death in the South, so the only choice for black people's survival was to engage in open resistance that was never going to be accomplished. He writes, "because the negro was the most cast out of all the outcast people in America, I felt that no other group in America could tackle this problem of what our American lives meant so well as the Negro could." (350). Fabre observes that by providing his voice and writing an autobiography, Wright attempted to generate meaning from his boyhood by putting a pattern on it which could make his past a logical narrative of a writer's development over challenging circumstances. Wright desired to fight in a significant manner. He perceived his background as a cohesive pattern and turned it into an ideology construct advocating literacy growth against the antagonistic forces of white southern subjugation. Wright began reading an article one morning that slammed a white man named Mencken. Because he recognized that only black people were chastised in the South, he sensed a deep empathy for him as he was despised (just like blacks) by other whites from the South. This prompted him to investigate what his writings were about and why he was reviled. It is significant to mention that during that time, black people were not allowed to consume literature, discuss certain political and racial issues, or even have access to literary works from public libraries. Jim Crow rules prohibited him from borrowing materials for self-consumption. Wright writes, "Negroes were

not allowed to patronize its shelves any more than they were the parks and playgrounds of the city" (268).

He was however able to navigate around this prohibition. He therefore meticulously constructed a scheme to obtain books from the library by requesting a card from another kind white man, Mr. Falk, who was despised by other whites due to his faith. He lied that the book had been requested by his white employer. Wright was aware that Falk had read H.L. Mencken. He asked a library card from a good Samaritan, Mr Falk who urged Wright not to tell other whites. Wright faked "a foolproof note" to get the books (270-74). Although Wright felt that he had defied the Jim Crow system when the librarian indicated an interest in what Mr. Falk wanted with Mencken "I knew now that I had won; she was thinking of other things and the race question had gone out of her mind" (270-71). Not only does racist society negate Wright, but he too must negate himself, at least in public. He had to fool the librarian by pretending that he was illiterate because that is what whites were expecting from blacks. This made him live a double life by hiding his subjectivity. Thus, his subjectivity must always be hidden; it can never be displayed in public or be recognized by most whites who surround him. Orlando Patterson argues that the slave can never be the subject of property, only its object. Black people in this Jim Crow society can only be objects, not subjects. Although he participated in his negation, his cunning behavior in the library calls into question the Jim Crow belief that African Americans were cognitively inferior to whites. Wright demonstrated in *Black Boy* how he was impressed by Mencken's unambiguous approach of employing "words as a weapon." He writes, "I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate ... yes this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club ... I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody dared to say it" (Wright 1966, p. 274). On the other hand, his discovery of Mencken's works depressed him in that he discovered he missed a lot of important things by growing up in the South. Thus, according to JanMohammed, literature became a mirror of his negation and suffering and affirmed his sense of alienation, "I no longer felt that the world around me was hostile, killing; I knew it," (239).

It is important to note that reading and writing challenged other resistance forms that he wanted to resort to. The only option he chose was literature as he used his mind as a reflection that would lead to his consciousness. He writes, "I held my life in my mind each day, feeling that I would stumble and drop it forever" (277). He is aware of what the hegemony demands though he does not yield his emotions to its power. He experiences himself fully as a demeaned being, at the same time succeeding in maintaining a space where his humanity is unbroken. Wright stated that he told whites that he was unable to read at all when asked whether the books were for him. When he carries a book to work, he conceals it by wrapping it in a newspaper. Reading verified his perception of the norms of social death while also expanding Wright's understanding of human possibilities. The space he inhabits is locked off and secluded from family members and the surroundings they live in. While Davies associates location with security and space with equality, Wright associates place with alienation rather than safety. As a result of mastering the technique of combating violence with words and using 'words as weapons' as influenced by Mencken, he can move beyond the restrictions of his environment. In as much as the environment of the South tried to suppress his psyche, Wright knew that he had not given in to its demands.

Robinson claims that Wright's novels "were consequently much more authentic documents than the conventional forms of history, biography, and political tract for they were constructed from lives with which he was intimate"(34). The South allowed him to reveal his humanness negatively, through stealing and fighting. He writes that the space only permitted him to be himself through violence and rebellion. It therefore gave him no other option but to be either a non-being or a rebel. Reading *Sister Carrie* brought up his conflicted memories of his mother's terrible suffering. Thus, according to JanMohamed, the forbidden books ended up serving as a reflection that mirrored his negation and encounter with misery. He became conscious that literature might be used for politically confrontational reasons, thereby giving him much-needed strength. He claims that literature was the miraculous solution for his alienation. He writes, "It had been only through books that I had managed to keep myself alive in a negatively vital way" (246). For him to stay away from the outside world, Wright chose an imaginative world so that he could introspect his isolation. Literature therefore became a world of "unlimited possibilities," perspectives that "were an ethical anchor that allowed him to realize that he is maintaining his emotional integrity whole," and thoughts that provided, "a support that allowed my personality to

limp through days lived under the threat of violence" (83-84). JanMohamed argues that Wright made a double impact when he wrote *Black Boy*. He nurtured his negation and presented that negation disguised as his autobiography. His choice of '*black boy*' as the title for his autobiography, means that he is portraying the formation of all black people who are racially objectified. When one looks at Wright's literary criticism, one discovers that the literary world is silent on how Jim Crow prejudices affected Wright's works.

Critics of Wright's works have mainly thus far focused on the issues of race relations. The main argument of how Jim Crow policies and regulations, harmed African Americans' sense of dignity and belonging has received relatively little scrutiny. Therefore, Wright had no choice but to use literature, a place where he practiced his defiance of Jim Crow culture and overcame racial formation mechanisms. Violence and resistance were frequent motifs in Wright's writing, which he skillfully blended into his "psychological suspense narrative" (Margolies, 1969: 4). Reading and writing have provided him with that space where he can find metaphorical answers to real conflicts in society, conflicts that are difficult to resolve. According to JanMohammed, a world of fiction has its roots in the unconscious and is meant to be an escape into the imagination to overlook some unpleasant present reality. Therefore, Wright joins the space that is politicized. He discovers that constraints that govern his actions in the outside world equally govern how the literary world operates. He writes, "I was building in me which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel.... I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo" (161).

One can only understand Wright's depiction of violence in these texts when one comprehends that black people's lives were embodied with negation and knew that their extinction was inevitable. Wright eventually fled to the South because "the numbness of my defensive living might thaw out and let me feel the pain of what living in the South had meant" (284). Although he knew he could not leave the South because it is an indelible part of himself, he hoped by relocating he might be able to resist his formation fully, "And if that miracle ever happened, then I would know that there was yet hope in that Southern swamp of despair and violence" (284). Irving Howe and Zora Neal, among other readers, believed that Wright's works' exceptional violence was indicative of either a smoldering animosity of humanity or a gratuitous self-

loathing of African Americans. However, according to Davis, Wright's use of violence was anything but needless. The violence throughout his upbringing only grew worse, from the malnutrition on Mississippi's plantations to the beatings, taunts, and deprivations by whites in the South. One might submit that Wright's willingness to use literature to combat racism against black people was a radical reaction to what he perceived as difficult options that African Americans were confronted with. Wright revealed the strategies he utilized if a book he wanted to read was not in the library: "When a book I wanted wasn't in, I would never ask for another. Oh, no! I would go out, change the list, and come back again" (Fabre, 16). Wright explained that Mencken's books were an inspiration to a discovery of a style of writing that made him use words "as one would use a club." White employees who inquired about exactly what he was reading did not object as long as he replied that he was either wasting time or reading romance. Reading additionally taught him that open fighting with white people was ineffective.

Wright's response to the injustices of Jim Crow in his autobiography was conflicted. On one hand, he painted white people as the ones who carried out Jim Crow brutality, especially during the times when he was finding employment. Wright was part of a generation of African Americans who were skeptical of any form of servitude in front of white people. He therefore believed that African Americans were part of the racial problem because they keenly took part in their subjugation. He furthermore tried to defy racial and societal traditions when he interacted with white people. Wright resisted the Jim Crow practices when he decided to put his dog on sale. He resisted using the back door after he was commanded by a white lady to do so. He writes, "Pride would never let me use the back door" (78). Again, Wright at one point immediately quit the job when a white lady told him he could never be a writer because he was black. Without considering the probable impact of his action saying to himself, "Perhaps she was right; perhaps I would never be a writer; but I did not want her to say so" (163). He was thus punished whenever he failed to listen and take instruction from a white man, sometimes he was violently beaten.

White men hold the degrading assumption of treating blacks as animals because blacks were not presumed to acquire scholarly capacities. Wright at one point lost his job because of his intelligence. His intellect was a big threat to white people's sense of superiority. He believed that by publishing his memoirs, he was defying both white power—represented by Jim Crow laws—

and familial societal norms, which had trained him to be subservient. Wallach argues that Wright eventually chose 'Wrighting' fiction as a means of communication with white and black audiences is indicative of a form of response to white racism in his decision to fight back with words. (209). After he managed to publish a short story as a black person, he was met with icy and severe criticism from all spheres (his family, friends, and school principal). His objectives, justifications for producing the story, tone, and even title were criticized by his peers. The people closest to him were the most critical. Everyone believed that by writing fiction, he was breaking the law. His granny called his writing, "the Devil's work" (48, 185). Aunt Addie said, "it was a sin for anyone to use the word 'hell' and that what was wrong with [Wright] was that [he] had nobody to guide him" (185-186). She felt that something was seriously wrong with his "childhood." The principal at the school even claimed that Wright had committed a crime by using the word "hell." They did not understand Wright and tried to prevent him from criticizing white people, Wright said that he was resolved "to leave the South and its funny-acting people, and go north and write many, many books" (Williams 1970, p. 34). This is exactly what occurred to him after migration to the North.

He therefore concluded his statement, "No power on earth can compel me to approve that which I deem unjust and morally fraudulent." (209) Literature became a space where Wright could examine his potential in a manner that is not restricted by the events of real life. Reading and writing have managed to solve his frustrations and constraints. Wright asserts that he "would have been frightened altogether out of his attempts at writing" if it were not for the liberating power of imagination. Wright pursued even in his dreams all he wished to achieve in reality, "I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo" (186-187). His greatest aspiration was to become a writer and travel to the North. He discovered through his dreams that all the derogatory remarks from his family and other white people were only a representation of the kind of work or lifestyle Jim Crowism believed black people should endure. Wright nevertheless found it challenging to comprehend the degree of misinformation and embrace of white hostility he discovered in the black community. Wright thus concluded that he was unable to fulfill his desire to reside in the South as he could see the dishonesty of the Jim Crow Laws. (Williams 1970, p. 34).

CHAPTER 2 THE CONCEPT OF AFRO-PESSIMISM IN *NATIVE SON* (1940)

Wright and Afro-Pessimism

Through *Native Son* Wright's desires according to JanMohammed is to expose the insentient structures of the dialectics of death by which Bigger is shaped, destined, and inspired, constructions that have been in place throughout slavery and Jim Crow society but have not been adequately unveiled before Wright's attempt. After the "non-event of emancipation," enslavement did not merely vanish. Rather, according to Frantz Fanon, the lawful denunciation of possession restructured subjugation, and the former slave became the racialized black "subject," whose status was labeled epidermally. What followed was a strong psychological and legal institutionalization of the notion of race. Formally, the black subject was not a slave anymore but the same foundational relation of systemic oppression that kept slavery alive remained, overtly supported by institutions and white supremacy in general, thus conserving the formula that black equals socially dead. "We are not invisible, that might sometimes be preferable. But on the streets, in stores, on elevators and restaurants, we are potential criminals or as servants, not as ourselves", (Franklin, 34). Just as vicious violence was a fundamental component of slavery, so it is to blackness. Narrating blackness, as Wright does, "means feigning ontological capacity even though blackness is incapacity in its most pure and unadulterated form" (Franklin, 38).

According to Fanon, the fact that in Wright's *Native Son*, "the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man," seems to be plausible for Bigger in his flight from whiteness (117). However, Wright's critics are not able to understand the most important point of the novel. Fisher states that before Bigger dies, not having yet lived, he is born finally into "humanity and makes his normal human response to a fellow man." (132). But this is the exact opposite of what happens. That very moment when Mary and Jan treat Bigger as a human being, they replicate the procedure that compels him into that dark domain of nothingness, between whiteness' humanity and blackness' sheer malignant objecthood. The way black people interact with white people for Wilderson, is ultimately a relationship between a master and a slave. Bigger felt uncomfortable because he knew that no recognition by the white person of the black person was possible. The narrative's development through the dichotomy of death does not eventually resolve Bigger not

as an ordinary human, but rather as someone unrestricted, and although momentarily, from the hegemony that defines the foundation of race. Orlando Patterson argues that the slave is dehumanized to the point where they are legally transformed into a commodity that can be used and transacted. Not only is their labor power commodified but also their very being. As a result, they are not identified as social subjects, they are excluded from the classification of "human."

This focus, expressed in the sheer brutality and cruelty of Bigger, is among the most controversial parts of *Native Son* (as well as Wright's work in general). James Baldwin famously critiques Wright for what he understands as a reproduction of negative black stereotypes. The tragedy of Bigger, for Baldwin, is that "he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth" ("*Everybody's Protest Novel*" 18). The problem is essentially that Bigger is pathological, that he fails to behave like a real human engaged in struggle and thus is a poor representative of black America. But Bigger is real. Growing up in the South, Wright documents five different iterations of him who compelled the creation of *Native Son* (*How 'Bigger' was Born*, 435-37). Baldwin himself admits that "no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull" ("*Many Thousands Gone*" 32).

Thus, black social life, which had offered a kind of respite to the violence of oppression in the South, was decimated in the industrializing North. In his literary project, Wright focuses on the mutilation of the inner life of black people because of their historical journey.

What Baldwin seeks to avoid is that "the trauma of leaving our African home, the suffering of the long middle passage, the thirst, the hunger, the horrors of the slave ship—all these hollowed us out, numbed us, stripped us, and left only physiological urges, the feelings of fear and fatigue" (*12 Million* 15). In short, Wright recognizes that he must account for "how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor" ("*How 'Bigger' was Born*" 453). In other words, Wright identifies black life and its inability to struggle with pathology. *Native Son*, then, is a case study of the struggle against this illness and the conditions which produce it.

Wright is gripped with the dialectics of death perspective as he tries to show that the main function of the rat scene is to "map the zone of bare life" as one underlying boundary that defines the subjectivity of Bigger. Many people can interpret the symbolism of the scene of the rat in different ways. However, JanMohammed argues that human beings who are pushed out of social life into the zone of bare life are forced to share their living space with animals and to compete with them for survival. Wright is emphasizing that the life in which Bigger's family lives is disrupted by the rat thereby lacking any privacy to maintain their human dignity. This is also shown when they maintain a system where boys turn their backs when women are dressing up. Black people, just like his mother, are condemned to endure the violence and pain of white oppression, without ever having a choice in the matter; they must accept the injustice or die at white hands. The way Bigger crushes the rat to death implies that he has a desire to kill even people who penetrate his life and disrupt his humanity. It is also important to note how Wright shows black people suffering had no choice and the violence against them compelled them to desire to return to the zone of unlimited symbolic capability. That is why when Bigger was told by his mother that she wondered why she birthed him, he clearly showed that he desired that he was not born. He tells his mother, "Maybe you oughtn't've. Maybe you ought to have left me where I was" (451). Thus, Wright shows that a black person's life once he is born is bracketed by death. Bigger and Gus repeat countless modes of racial oppression where Gus says, "sometimes you can't hardly breathe" (465). Therefore, the only emotions that may offer the kinetic connection that holds and sustains Bigger as a subject are fear and hostility. JanMohammed observes that Bigger's fear of physical death and his loathing of social death are what keep his racialized subjectivity afloat. As a result, he has completely surrendered to explosive aggression and anxiety and has been completely taken over by the death desire.

Patterson (1982) argues, "that the slave is not a laborer but an anti-human, a positionality against which humanity establishes, maintains and renews its coherence, its corporal integrity" (245). He concludes that being black means one has never truly been free because blackness is an anti-human state. Therefore, because they may be killed at any time, irrespective of committing an offense, black people were socially dead. When Wilderson (2010) claims that "black" still connotes "slave," it is in favor of this. No matter where he went, Bigger carried a weapon of some sort or a gun—not because he intended to use it, but because it made him feel complete and secure. Wright writes, "He had not heard of any Negroes being molested recently, but he felt it

was always possible." He became quite anxious when he attempted to cross the racial barriers to the Daltons household. He knew he was vulnerable to acts of violence wherever he went, therefore he constantly required a gun to feel complete and safe. According to Frantz Fanon (1967), the development of the black person's body schema is complicated in a world of white people. He further argues that body consciousness is a negating activity and a third-person consciousness. According to Du Bois, it is inevitable that blacks will begin to question, denigrate, and lower themselves since that is what happens to individuals who reside in a hostile and oppressive environment. He continues by explaining that the damaging emotional state might manifest physically, which means that the native may start to detest both themselves and everyone else. Bigger's internal and external conflicts were fueled by these emotions. Bigger mumbled, "But I just can't get used to it," Bigger said, "I swear to God I can't. I know I oughtn't to think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it, I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat" (154). Between him and the other world, there was an unasked question as expressed by Du Bois, a gulf between the two of them because of his blackness.

In reviewing Wright's text, Lionel Trilling stated of Wright, "He is not an object, he is a subject; he is the same kind of person as his reader, as he is the same kind of person as his reader, as complex, as free" (152). But, once again, Wright's objective is to clarify how being black is profoundly to survive as something like a thing in the sight of white people. Entirely accurate, Wright was the person who wrote, assumedly as a subject, as a representative with literary command. Would this, however, invalidate his explanation of the objectifying procedure which defines blackness? Is it possible that the channel of literary text on its own prevents the articulation of a particular concept of blackness?

Wright puts that;

I wanted to make the lives of these men known through the images already accepted as the common coin of communication. I wanted to make them know that they had allies, that more people than they knew, and in ways they did not understand, were their friends, and that I was their friend. I wanted to voice the words in them that they could not say, to be a witness for their living (338-9).

It is hardly surprising that Bigger has been referred to in the media and by the state attorney as "this black lizard...black crazy dog..." Orlando Patterson (1982) said that the nature of being black is that you are rejected in your very existence, before performing dishonorable things. Given that he was black, Bigger understood that law enforcement was going to reject that he had accidentally killed Mary. Because of race relations in Chicago during this time, black people were presumed guilty before they were ever convicted. As argued by Frantz Fanon a black person is given no chance as he is over-determined from without. Therefore, Wright acts and sees himself as a mediator between black people who are dead socially but not dead and their allies. He wishes to give voice to their existence, "resurrecting them from the margins of death" and reintroducing them "to mainstream life" (JanMohamed 33). The aim is for the socially dead to recognize the world through Wright, and the socially surviving to acknowledge their existence. He is also effectively attempting to resolve his emancipation from the boundaries of life, making him fundamental to the process of subject creation. He therefore according to Abdul JanMohammed binds the lives of the socially dead to his own life in response to the death-bound subject. Wright's attempted role as a common coin fundamentally structures his placement regarding his work and is thus responsible for his greatest strengths as a writer and organizer, as well as his greatest weaknesses.

However, Bessie's passing helped people comprehend how black people are reduced to nonbeings because the white system did not charge Bigger for her murder; he was rather detained, charged, and given the death penalty for the murder of Mary Dalton. That alone demonstrates the bias within the American legal system. Wright is attempting to demonstrate that American justice does not advance in any way to provide justice to a black person by demonstrating that any offense that does not involve any white people is not their concern. Instead, they rejoice in the deaths of black people since allowing them to murder one another is an effective strategy to diminish the number of black people. According to Fanon, the native was permitted to beat and torment his fellow. This was part of the strategy used by whites to conquer black people. Bigger was molded by the white people until his behavior according to Fanon was "violence in its natural state." Bigger became spiraled with hostility to such an extent that prepared to kill his girlfriend without second thoughts.

Wright's purpose is to explain how being black is fundamentally to exist as a kind of object in white eyes. It should be emphasized that Bigger's destiny is death and that accepting death gradually turned into a requirement for his independence. Bigger says "I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my appearance." Thus, his existence is subdued by barriers of prejudice. Max later states, "His very existence is a crime against the state". Wright eventually terms this state of isolation, through Max's words, a "new form of life," one that white Americans do not comprehend and intend to conquer out of guilt.

The problem according to Wright, essentially, is the problem of anti-blackness itself. Wright's representation of blackness, even in his attempt to elevate and liberate black people, reproduces the very pathological analysis that both Wright and Fanon describe. In this way, Wilderson describes this relationship as a "structural antagonism," because it is the logic on which the Western world is founded. The opening epigraph in which Bigger encounters Mrs. Dalton:

He turned and a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream. A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body. It was Mrs. Dalton (85).

Bigger is frozen in an aporetic structure, in the gaze of Mrs. Dalton. He is forced into that shadowy region of non-existence, and his recognition of Mrs. Dalton as that white specter that perpetually haunts him is the recognition by Wright that "there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white" (Fanon, *Black Skin* xiv). The violence against black people which Wilderson understands as "a human and a metaphysical holocaust," expelled black people from ontological understanding "because it positions the black in an infinite and indeterminately horrifying and open vulnerability, an object made available for any subject" (38). For Wilderson, a common comparison is made to the Jewish person in the concentration camp, who was similarly reduced from the status of the human to the sub- or non-human just like the black person. Nevertheless, the analogy fails for Wilderson because it "erroneously locates Blacks in the world—a place where they have not been since the dawning of blackness" (37). Whereas Jewish people entered Auschwitz and left as Jewish, "Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks" (38).

According to Patterson, a slave cannot only be the subject of property but also the object of it, making him a slave. He cannot possibly possess himself as property, the inference being. The master and that aspect of himself that has cooperated with the master fundamentally mediate how he interacts with himself. Bigger has come to regard himself as a thing, as a socially dead person. The part of himself that desired independence had to contend with the portion that had come to terms with his demise. Thus, the only practical means by which he might free himself is through violence. Therefore, he occupies an extremely conflicting and explosive subject position.

Bigger's declaration to Max towards the end of *Native Son* that "What I killed for must've been good!" is a refusal to narrate blackness and instead functions as a prioritization of action over meaning (JanMohamed (126). Although Bigger's future is symbolized by a rat, when he is faced with death, he resists fate with determination and boldness. On the one hand, Bigger's self-affirmation, his acceptance of death as a result of the dialectic of death, is the realization of Fanon's dream that the black man looks the colonizer in the eyes without fear. Thus, the refusal to narrate demonstrates an implicit recognition of the inevitable pathologizing of blackness and a commitment to the event of blackness, of black liberation, to come. Bigger's murder of Mary is not merely misplaced class antagonism, as one Marxist reading of *Native Son's* finale might suggest, but an unthinkable event of decolonial violence that challenges the very foundation of the West. Wright is therefore showing that Bigger is living in a society where social relations are defined by violence. Therefore, he is in a predicament where he must decide whether to embrace his social death or jeopardize his life by engaging in an altercation with his master. Mohammed claims that to achieve his release, he must first acknowledge his loneliness, then his role in his stifling, and last, he must dismantle or overthrow his formation.

BIGGER AND SOCIAL DEATH

Orlando Patterson has introduced the concept of social death which refers to slavery's exceptional segregation and brutality, specifically the oppression of black people in America.

Patterson defines "social death" as "the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons" (1982, 13). In general terms then, social death is configured through these three constitutive elements: excessive violence; alienation from all filial bonds outside of the master–slave relation; and degradation that fixes the powerlessness of the slave

about the master. The theory of Afro-pessimism, advocated by Frank Wilderson, is based on the controversial concept that blackness is equal to slavery and that blackness is social death. JanMohamed uses Orlando Patterson's ground-breaking study *Slavery and Social Death* to describe black people as slaves even after their ostensible emancipation under the *Emancipation Proclamation* (1982). Patterson describes how, even after the Civil War, black people were subjected to social death, even if it was not strictly legal. Essentially, "the most distinctive feature of the slave's powerlessness was that it always originated... as a substitute for [their] death, usually violent" (5). The slave in exchange for their existence, had to surrender totally to their master, making them powerless. They were, however, not absolved simply for submitting. Instead, "death was conditionally commuted and could be revoked at the master's whim" (JanMohamed, 16). They were surrounded by constant risk of death, particularly lynching, and this caused them to fully yield to their white masters. Slaves were thus socially dead in that they did not exist as a socio-political society and were therefore dead because they could be killed without breaking any legal systems.

The desire to kill is recognized as a political instrument used for intimidation in Wright's book *Native Son*. Wright uses the concept of death to show how a certain type of death has been developed and injected into creatures who are constrained by it, Wright uses the concept of death. According to JanMohamed, the slave's transaction with the master involves the slave's conversion into an appropriated subject commodity and the slave's forced assent to the master's transformation. As a result, their relationship is a covenant insofar as the slave has the option of choosing death over continuing to be a slave. Thus, in *Native Son*, Wright demonstrates the creation of the 'death-bound-subject'. He argues that social and actual death produce a death-bound subject. His fundamental aim is on the dialectics of death. In investigating the dialectics of death, he articulates the Dubois notion of double consciousness. As a result, Wright significantly increases the readers' conception of the Jim Crow racial economy, and how it is the threat of death to split the existence of black people in two. JanMohammed claims that *Native Son* is a largely constant book that starts with death and finishes with the same. Bigger starts in a death cell and ends up in another type of death cell, which is an important distinction to make. As a result, the work may be viewed as charting the progression from one kind of death to another. Bigger Thomas is an illustration of an African American whose blackness is social death by his continued isolation from socialization and the structures of power. Fanon calls this 'zone of

nonbeing' a peculiar paradox, where the black man is the absent-present. That is why Max argues that his existence on its own is a crime against the state- the white system. Wright writes, "Had he not taken fully upon himself the crime of being black, his very existence is a crime against the state "(400). It is important to note that the fact that Bigger cannot even defend himself to his jury or his reader only Bigger's experience of social death.

Wright introduces the defenseless existence on the margin between the social and actual death of Bigger and his family. He then emphasizes how this border joins Bigger's subjectivity from the outside while concurrently embracing it from within. Fanon hits home the point, when he argues that there is no path out of this end game. He argues that the colonized is a prisoner of a vicious cycle destined to a life of constant denial, rejection, disillusionment, and overdetermination (from the outside), her lived experiences cannot be reasoned (Fanon, 9596). Without a past and a future and alienated from her visceral experiences of living as a black body, the colonized is left to occupy the "crossroads between nothingness and infinity"(119). Wright's endeavor and thus Bigger's life, is defined by social death and the violent struggle against it. Bigger is always in prison as a twenty-year-old black man, even before his "brutal" killing of the wealthy white daughter of Mr. Dalton, his intended escape from the police, his ultimate capture, and his guilty verdict in court. His skin's blackness negates his existence and the possibility of a future. He therefore cannot help but feel a sense of dread throughout the novel. Michel Izard asserts that Bigger appears therefore to be marked by an original, permanent defect that weighs endlessly upon his destiny. Standing outside a poolroom, he asks his friend Gus where white people live.

"You know where the white folks live?" "Yeah," Gus said, pointing eastward. "Over the 'line'; over there on Cottage Grove Avenue." "Naw; they don't," Bigger said. "What do you mean?" Gus asked, puzzled. "Then, where do they live?" Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus. "Right down here in my stomach," he said. Gus looked at Bigger searchingly, then away, as though ashamed. "Yeah; I know what you mean," he whispered. "Every time I think of 'em, I feel 'em," Bigger said. "Yeah; and in your chest and throat, too," Gus said. "It's like fire." "And sometimes you can't hardly breathe " Bigger's eyes were wide and placid, gazing into space. That's when I feel like something awful's going to happen to me...." Bigger paused, and narrowed his eyes. "Naw; it ain't like something going to happen to me. It's like I was going to do something I can't help." (20).

In this conversation, we find the basic structure of the problem that defines the *Native Son*. The brutal anti-blackness that Bigger and Gus's face is not only experienced in the evident injustice of Chicago housing segregation but even more so in the raw feeling of fear and imprisonment that they can never escape. It is intrinsic to their lives. Karl Marx identified slavery to be a relation of power and he relates an unusual role of violence in establishing and preserving that domination. And yet, while Bigger willingly discusses this violence which caused internal terror, Gus's shame reveals his anxiety about the implications of their carceral existence. Bigger is constantly terrified when interacting with the oppressor since he is a target of cruelty and scorn and is trying to thrive in a white society. According to Friedrich, the slave was reduced to the status of a social nonperson because he did not have a socially acknowledged status apart from his owner. Therefore, Bigger's anxiety, fear, enslavement, and tyranny must lead to an outburst and a rebellion. He constantly has the impression that horrible things are about to befall him, or that he will eventually be held accountable for bad things he is going to do. One way of understanding this fearful behavior is through what JanMohamed calls the "*death-bound-subject*" in his study of Wright. For JanMohamed, the death-bound subject is "the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (2). Emblematic of this subjectivity is the simple, yet harrowing, line in which Wright said, "I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings" (74). Thus, black people in Wright's *Native Son* are slaves, forced to obey white people under the continuous intimidation of death and their lease on life can be rescinded at any moment. In this way, the death-bound subject is "a deeply aporetic structure to the extent that he is 'bound,' and hence produced as a subject, by the process of 'unbinding'" (JanMohamed, 2). This is an unendurable tension in the subject's self-reproduction, what the subject ties itself to is the process of subject denial and destruction, the process that removes the subject from existence.

According to Patterson (1982), continuous acts of physical aggression, geographic separation, and private abuses intended to cause dishonor prevented the slave from achieving social connections. These essential aspects of enslavement are performed, but the result is more than simply a show of dominance and exclusion. Instead, by establishing the parameters of what it means to be "human" and what it means to possess human capacity, they facilitate the formation of the force of social life. Even when Bigger Thomas is with "friendly" white people, the terms

of social death mean that he explicitly loses his ontological status. As a chauffeur for the wealthy Dalton family, Bigger is asked to drive the daughter Mary Dalton to her university lectures. However, on their very first outing, Mary takes Bigger to meet Jan Erlone, her lover and a Communist Party member. Despite Mary and Jan's attempts to be kind to Bigger, such as shaking his hand and asking not to be called "sir," Bigger feels increasingly self-conscious and degraded:

Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated the badge of shame which he knew was attached to black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate (67).

Instead of elevating Bigger's status to a "normal" human being, Mary and Jan's behavior helps reproduce the racial divide which wrecks Bigger's psyche and denies him an ontology. White people normally never treat Bigger with such respect and kindness; for Bigger, Jan and Mary's attempts at compassion deny his racial status. In essence, they treat him like a "normal" person, which is to say, like a white person. In doing so, they make Bigger increasingly aware of his blackness, his non-whiteness. Of course, Bigger's reaction is one of "a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate" (67). As a result, Jan, and Mary force Bigger into this space of non-existence, seemingly denying both whiteness and blackness, but retaining an implicitly pathological status. How can Bigger remain on the page—presumably still in existence—and yet lose his ontological status? In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon makes a similar point in his famous line, "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (90). Fanon argues essentially that the category of ontology, based on a *Hegelian* idea of mutual recognition, cannot comprehend or account for blackness. Under the Hegelian framework, each subject recognizes and realizes themselves in the other, but to Fanon, the black subject is not allowed to reciprocate the recognition of the white man. The black person is defined as black because of their association with whiteness, not because of their intrinsic subjecthood. That is to say, "the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man," in that their lived experience of

reality cannot be assimilated to that of a white person (117). Therefore, the black person finds themselves not a subject, but rather "an object among other objects" (89).

Linked to the death-bound subject, the black person exists in an aporetic position, caught between being a subject and an object. Fanon argues that consequently, ontology simply cannot account for the lived experience of the black person. For Moten, blackness can never fully escape the representational demands of ontology (ontology's attempt to represent it as a pathological object), but at the same time ontology can never fully capture it: blackness, in short, remains forever fugitive. Amid the stifling conditions of social death, Moten understands this fugitive as a way of conceptualizing blackness from an optimistic perspective, one in which blackness is simultaneously a negation and an excess, something which is concurrently expelled and incomprehensible (182). It is in black art—of which Wright is an exemplar—that Moten finds an emblematic instance of this fugitive movement, in "between the color black and what it absorbs and reflects, what it takes in and pours out" (204). Bigger because of his blackness exists as a socially dead being on the point of famine. he was under intense pressure from his family to assume the position of his father and support his family financially. He is aware that accepting the job offer at the Daltons will make him unhappy (456). Bigger's subjectivity has been cleaved by death as a result of the way he has to decide between social death and actual death, and as a result of the enormous effort needed to suppress the realization of that structuring cleavage, "he hated his family because he knew they were suffering and that he couldn't do anything to help them," the author writes. Furthermore, Bigger's mother told him that she regretted that she gave birth to Bigger. Bigger responded by saying, "Maybe you ought not to have, you ought to have left me where I was" (451). He desires to return to that 'zone of infinite abstract potentiality that precedes life, a zone of symbolic death' according to JanMohammed. At the other end Bigger's future life is similarly marked by his mother's prophesying, "and the gallows is at the end of the road you are traveling, boy." (453. He knew that the minute he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So, he denied himself and acted tough (453).

Despite being confined inside Chicago's black belt, Bigger has the same hopes and aspirations as any other child. his captivity and the decision to give up his dreams make him lonely and violent. Frantz Fanon (1968) argues that "the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his

dreams are of action and aggression.... The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor." When Max was addressing the judge, he said, "Your honor, remember that men can starve from a lack of self-realization, and they can murder for it too! Did we not build a nation, did we not wage war and conquer in the name of a dream to realize our personalities and to make those realized personalities secure? (354)" According to Max Bigger's murder of Mary is therefore 'an act of creation'. Just as the American revolution created the founding fathers, so does his aggression build him as an American man. As a result, black people violently created themselves to reject their race and enslavement. According to Du Bois (1994), stereotypes of African Americans as evil, unproductive, lazy, and incompetent were fostered by white people. They, blacks decided to use aggression to assert their right to exist since they felt stigmatized as a result of these unfavorable stereotypes. Although Bigger's treatment of Mary's corpse is undoubtedly horrific, it's necessary to take into account the emotional drive that led to it. Abdul contends that this psychic urge, which has its roots in the historical eras of slavery and transportation, is a product of the environment, and financial, political, and social circumstances that exist around him. Bigger is motivated by the fear of being discovered, not the fear of the average criminal, but the fear of a helpless creature forced to compete against an overwhelming force. Bigger behaves like a trapped creature scrambling to survive because he always feels like he has been forced into a small space. His actions are guided by the simple rationale of survival in an environment that is constantly encircling and suffocating him. Arnold Rampersad notes that he also acted out of fear when he threw Bessie Mears' body into the air duct after hitting her in the face with a brick. Although he first intends to flee with Bessie, he soon starts to perceive her as an impediment to his freedom of mobility and, out of dread of being apprehended, decides to kill her as well. His situation might be analyzed as an example of someone who must now face what they have done.

He also behaves like a seasoned criminal since he believes he will be caught by the law and given the death penalty sooner rather than later. He can only attempt to delay the beginning of his detention because there is no chance of escape. His skin color generates fear, which drives him to commit heinous crimes and commit atrocities of horror. Bessie's passing tightens the grip around Bigger since he is now accused of two separate crimes that are practically identical, and more significantly, because it makes him appear guilty in sight of both races. Bigger is therefore in a situation similar to that of a wounded helpless animal in a cage. However, this feeling of

being caged is not particular to the trial period alone, for this claustrophobic feeling exists throughout his living experience as a black, and it is not only Bigger but the entire black community that is shown as undergoing this caged, claustrophobic experience in every living moment. "Every white man, no matter how low, is above every non-white, no matter how high" (Appiah, 06). The stereotype of the Negro is constructed with the deliberate attempt of projecting the Negro as less human, the roots of this deliberate representation again going back to the days of slavery in the southern plantations where the Negro was not a human but a piece of reproductive machinery devoid of any right over life or property. As Fanon views violence as the currency of colonialism, it becomes an omnipresent feature of daily life for the colonial subject (Fanon, 1963: 61). Nothing could be nearer to truth than the trial of Bigger Thomas which was moving towards his death sentence from its very beginning, as the demand from the crowd during his trial rises for his lynching.

The way Wright treats violence and resistance is very close to what Fanon outlines in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon argues that violence is necessary to achieve liberation from a social structure that is a form of state violence, and he gives considerable weight to the importance of an underlying consciousness and of collectively concerted action. Under colonialism, like Bigger, are (quasi) deterministically prompted to direct violence at fellow victims of oppression in what amounts to a 'fratricidal bloodbath'. For Fanon, the repudiation of the Western ethical and religious values designed to prop up the state's legitimized violence, as Bigger also comes to realize, is central to the consciousness required to overcome these misdirected hostilities. Indeed, Bigger's symbolic visions, which hint at a universal humanity that underlies a world alienated by dehumanizing racism, seem to be grasping toward what Fanon describes as the 'new humanity' that is created out of the process of liberation.

Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the "thing" which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself (Fanon 1963 p. 36-37). Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature...their first encounter was marked by violence, and their existence together – the exploitation of the native by the settler – was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons (1963 p.36). Violence frequently gives those under oppression a feeling of strength and the impression that their abilities may expand beyond

boundaries set by the repressive white society. Bigger feels empowered after killing a white person white people, feels like he was revenging all the evils the white society did to him, revenging the death of his father. Fanon argues that colonial rule is maintained through violence and oppression. He strongly emphasizes that colonial rule 'is the bringer of violence into the home and the mind of the native' (1963, p. 38). Fanon even asserts that violence is the 'natural state' of colonial rule (1963 p. 61). This violence derives from the racialized views that the colonizer has about the colonized subjects. Bigger was invisible, "the situation of a man whose individual identity is denied" (Lieber, 86). He was aware of the idea of social death as were other black people, but this had an impact on his very being and way of living. He was struggling to establish his identity in the white American community. Bigger managed to avoid being the most likely perpetrator when Mary Dalton was killed because of his invisibility. The fact that Bigger is a "terrifying reflection of his dark society" (George, 503) should not be overlooked. His brutal reactions are a true representation of the harsh and repressive atmosphere he experienced. His angry and violent nature includes elements of fear and anger for people who mistreat him. He thus tries to use aggression, as the sole means available to defend himself. He is a "representative black victim of white racism, closed off from self-fulfillment and self-expression, isolated from the world around him, who turns to violence" (Bryant, 12). To Bigger, violence became a natural reaction to resist white hegemony and any threat he faced. He does not want the space he is trapped in; therefore, it becomes difficult for him to face injustice and violence without resisting in the same way. The opportunities and routine of everyday life for blacks are deeply affected by racial discrimination (Essed and Feagin, 101-116). Because white people killed Bigger's father, he developed a strong exterior and became the hardened individual that he is now. This occurrence incites aggression towards white people.

Black violence, then, serves as a constructive force in *Native Son*, enabling Bigger to overcome apathy. He considers his identity as a human being for the first time after killing Mary. *Native Son* shows how the objectification of black people by white people leads to violence. Violence enables black people to see themselves as intellectual, independent beings, even though a lack of resistance obscures black awareness. Additionally, the only means through which black people may escape objectification and create a new identity is through violence. The development of violence enables Bigger to redefine himself according to his own choices (Thomason, 11). Fanon states that 'The native cures himself of colonial neurosis by thrusting out the settler through force

of arms' (1963 p. 21). Thus, the native discovers that his life, his breath, and his beating heart are the same as those of the settler. He finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin, and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner...for if my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone (1963, p. 45).

Up until that point, Bigger Thomas had the idea that white people were all-powerful, invincible supermen who ran his life. His internalized thoughts of self-hatred, which were brought on by repeated repetition from the colonial power, can be eliminated by the violence, which acts as an intervening occurrence. When considering non-being, blackness, and negativity, Fanon's ideas on the function of violence are inextricably linked. It is intended to be used both as an external tool to destroy the strongholds of colonial authority and exploitation and as an internal tool to rid the colonized of the fantastical illusions that shape their social reality. Bigger succeeds in regaining his sense of control and self-worth. Before he accidentally killed Mary, he was so terrified of white people that even the mere thought of using violence against them paralyzed him. The chance to see that his previous subservient views are unable to give him an expedient answer is provided by Bigger Thomas' crime.

After accidentally killing Mary, Bigger realizes that he has destroyed the enormous white mountain that has been holding him down. This realization gave him a renewed sense of his existence and his value as a person. The system had ingrained in him an atavistic terror, but he is now free of it. Consequently, Bigger's change is the result of the murder he performs on Mary Dalton, a crime that has a profound psychological effect on him. After the murder, a new, momentarily free Bigger appears in place of the character that was previously reckless and afraid. The killing of a white person made his muscles relax; he was freed of an unseen load that he had been dragging for quite a while. At this point, he transforms what happens to an individual when he makes an ontological decision. He claims that he has control over himself after the murder, indicating that he is conscious of his regeneration as an "unconstrained" individual. Mary's killing, according to Bigger's attorney, was a form of pre-existential formation to him; prior, his life had been regulated by white people, but after the murder, he believes he can create his being on terms that suit him. Bigger uses the murderous deed as a catalyst for regeneration. Max likewise provides an accurate justification. It was one of the most significant,

thrilling, and exciting events that had ever experienced; it represented the first complete act of his existence. He consented because it set him free, allowed him to make decisions and act, provided him the chance to do so, and made him feel as though his choices mattered. The effort that Bigger undertakes to extract a ransom from the situation is another indication that he is learning to control himself. Bigger previously foiled the plan to rob Mr. Blum, fully aware of the consequences of entering the domain of the white man. Now, however, he is brave enough to try to fool whites by conflating the murder case with a ransom demand. Bigger declares his emancipation and self-realization through violence. Because he destroyed their most valuable item, he now regards himself as being on par with white people. After Mary passes away, he starts contemplating that by killing Mary, he has metaphorically removed every threat that has ruined his life. In Mary Dalton, the ideal manifestation of the system, he destroys white oppression.

Even though Bigger has admitted to all of his crimes, Buckley still attempts to portray all black people as the antithesis of all that white people stand for. He maintains that raping a white girl Mary was the main crime that he perpetrated because it is the sole act that demonstrates the intentional and repulsive contamination of whiteness by blackness. Buckley continues to describe his perception that rape is not something men do to women but is something that blackness does to whites unless death intervenes. Thus, Fanon puts that the colonized is a specter wandering between two worlds, one dead and the other, powerless to be born and with nowhere to rest, she is a neglected, impossible figure of non-being. The colonized must stay invisible as there is no room for the colonized to appear non-violently. Does this leave Bigger as emblematic of Wright's pathologizing tendencies, as James Baldwin suggests? Gordon asserts that an acceptable being is non-existence, non-appearance, or submergence. To change things is to appear but to appear is to be violent (12). In the moment with Mary and Jan, there is a failed attempt to reduce him to objecthood as they drag him into the "shadowy region" between whiteness and blackness. This indeterminate place, while not objecthood and pure pathological existence, is nevertheless unendurable, and so his hate grows. But only in the next scene, when Bigger commits the fatal act, do we witness the consequences of the time spent in this contradictory space, the beginning of Bigger's flight from the law as a fugitive.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explicitly references Bigger to make a similar point:

It's Bigger Thomas who is afraid, terribly afraid. But afraid of what? Of himself. We don't yet know who he is, but he knows that fear will haunt the world once the world finds out. And when the world finds out, the world always expects something from the black man. He is afraid that the world will find out; he is afraid of the fear in the world if the world knows (118).

The fear that Bigger articulates with Gus will inevitably result in something like the murder of Mary. This violence is not an incidental effect of social death—in fact, the world demands Bigger do what he is afraid of the most. Ultimately, in a sense, Bigger must give in to the demands. From this viewpoint, it appears that Bigger's murder of Mary is formed by antiblackness. It is crucial to note that towards the end, Bigger is convinced that his actions were positive when he thinks "What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something. I didn't know I was alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" (429).

Thus, JanMohamed asserts that in his symbolic death, Bigger comes to realize not just the political significance of his actions, but also how his liberation commands the meaning of his actions. Moten also avers that the meaning of Bigger's life is unwritable. However, when one considers the probability of black positivity, it must have been good, for now, Bigger knows how to die, something he had been searching for, unknowingly, his entire life. Under these conditions of social death and acute deprivation, Wright seems to be arguing that there is always an existential opening for meaningful rebellion in the struggle for black emancipation, one that is dialectical. The potential freedom that Wright depicts in *Native Son* also arises from his writing itself. To endure the violence of the Jim Crow South, Wright conjures up "spontaneous fantasies" that acted as "a moral bulwark that enabled me to feel I was keeping my emotional integrity whole, a support that enabled my personality to limp through days lived under the threat of violence" (*Black Boy* 74). To avoid the definitive emotional damage that he establishes because of social death, Wright escapes into his fantasy world as a protection of his consciousness. In this world, Wright also "rehearses his resistance to Jim Crow society" and thus begins to grasp "the processes of racial formation" (JanMohamed, 170).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Wright used his experiences to write his literature therefore you cannot separate his personal experiences from his works. One can argue that for him to deal with his subjugation and hurtful experiences, he used literature to show how black people were isolated, and oppressed and had no choice but to use liberating violence. Brignano notes that Wright's works were "a search to discover whether black men could live with dignity and without fear in a world dominated by white men" (ix).

His use of literature to resist white oppression can be seen as a political response to what complex choices African Americans faced. Wright's works are an indictment of the Jim Crowism practices and he never gave up in the struggle for black people's emancipation. He also blamed black people as part of the problem of their subjugation. Thus, he used Mencken's style of fighting with words to bring consciousness to his people. Therefore, I believe that his work should be judged in the context of subjugation and decolonization. Writing gave Wright the power and avenue to explore his subjectivity and reawaken renewed awareness into his consciousness. His environment gave him only two choices, to become a rebel or a slave. He chose to be a rebel, and this undoubtedly led him to be an oddball. Many times, he identified himself with other black people but there was something in his consciousness that was different from them. He was loyal to other blacks like Fanon who envisaged a "battle for the creation of a human world of reciprocal recognition" (229). Wright held a "sense of the world that was mine and mine alone, a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering (88-89).

Although the use of violence in Wright's works is spine-chilling, it is the objectification of blacks by whites that necessitates the formation of black identity through violence. Wright and other scholars like Fanon agree that the victim of generalized violence becomes violent himself. Bigger Thomas' unfathomable aggression calls into question not only this argument but also the logic of the world in which we exist. The hopeful and pessimistic parts of Wright's works in which he attempts to provide black people access to 'pure' humanity exist primarily as an abstract compensation for his profound pessimism regarding black existence and emancipation. Wright,

in my opinion, devoted himself to embracing all negative characterization to negate it. His dedication to this endeavor was unwavering. Bigger, Wright's most negative protagonist, is so stifled that he barely can breathe. If colonial subjugation is so extremely negating as to even control one's self-sustaining neurological system and capacity to breathe, we must therefore challenge the likelihood that many black people are reduced to seeing themselves as subjugated truths. As a result, consistent defiance of hegemony may be required not only for the emancipation of black people's cognitive abilities but of their expressions and beings. Thus, violence is the only means available to blacks to function as autonomous human entities.

Fanon argues that violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there is nothing but a fancy dress parade and the blare of trumpets (118). As a result, black people had to acknowledge that slavery was inherently violent and that violence degraded to being non-human. When they recognized the role that violence played in dehumanizing them, they found their buried dignity and transformed violence from a tool of oppression to one for nationwide emancipation. Due to the colonized system's deprivation of educational opportunities and culture for the people, intellectuals played an important role in shaping the new consciousness. Liberation violence was required to destroy the colonial system that was created and sustained by repression violence.

Even in his brief moments of liberation following Mary's murder, Bigger never escapes his blackness and achieves human status. Nonetheless, Wright remains dedicated to the liberation movement and the potential of a future free of anti-blackness. For the violence of decolonization to represent the end of the world, it must be so violent that it destroys all narratives and literature. The ideal unity that Wright envisions is so far away that discussing it exposes our genuine naiveté. We must keep in mind that although there is a Bigger Thomas in every black person, there is also a Richard Wright, who we must allow to awaken in us. Black violence is not protected in the society in which we live like white-on-black violence is. While the purpose, action, and influence of violent acts performed by whites and blacks may appear to be identical, the effects of violence are substantially distinct for blacks. In the eyes of white society, Wright notes that white-on-black violence means sacrificing black lives so that "peaceful and industrious

people may be safe." Black violence by contrast is the expression of subhuman killers who know no law and no sense of reason (414, 408). Whites are therefore naïve to the effects of white violence because they focus on the problem of black violence, leaving the cycles of violence unabated.

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