

**Beneath Utopian Skylines:
Richard Wright, the Left, and the Struggle for Bigger Thomas**

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He wanted no more crosses that might turn to fire while still on his chest...
Was not his old hate a better defense than this agonized uncertainty?...
Was he not heightening the horror of his own end by straining after a flickering hope?¹

– Richard Wright, *Native Son*, Book Three, “Fate”

I. Bigger Thomas in London – with Lenin and Gorky

In “How Bigger Was Born” (HBWB), Richard Wright’s extended reflection on the origins and implications of his best-selling novel *Native Son* (1940), Wright relates a formative memory of reading a pamphlet “telling of the friendship of Gorky and Lenin in exile.” Walking through the streets of London, Wright recalls, Lenin turned to Gorky, “the internationally renowned procommunist author, and, pointing to the skyline, declared: ““Here is *their* Big Ben.’ ‘There is *their* Westminster Abbey.’ ‘There is *their* library”” (517, emphases in original). The episode brings Wright to recount a retrospective epiphany, as he recognizes in Lenin’s words a phenomenon he had seen before: “That’s Bigger. That’s the Bigger Thomas reaction” (518), referring to his infamous protagonist. “In both instances,” he writes:

the deep sense of exclusion was identical. The feeling of *looking at things with a painful and unwarrantable nakedness* was an experience, I learned, that transcended national and racial boundaries. It was this intolerable sense of feeling and understanding so much, and yet living on a plane of social reality *where the look of a world which one did not make or own struck one with a blinding objectivity and tangibility*, that made me grasp the revolutionary impulse in my life and the lives of those about me and far away. (518, emphasis added)

It is a striking passage, for starters because Wright links his own violent anti-hero Bigger Thomas, killer of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears, with a figure recognized as one of the most influential

¹ Richard Wright, *Native Son*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1993. (394, 422-3)

revolutionary communist organizers of the early 20th century – V. I. Lenin.² Wright thus connects the incipient ‘criminal’ violence of oppressed black youth in the United States with the radical alienation of revolutionaries abroad. Readers of *Native Son* might be surprised to learn that Wright saw in Bigger Thomas the stuff that Bolsheviks were made of.

But as Wright makes clear in HBWB, he was not suggesting Bigger (or the lumpen/proletarian social layer he symbolizes) was spontaneously inclined to Communism, nor that such immediate ‘criminal’ rebellion was inherently headed towards anti-capitalism. He meant merely that, as the “product of a dislocated society... a dispossessed and disinherited man,” Bigger Thomas’ “deep sense of exclusion” in America “amid the greatest possible plenty on earth” would drive him inexorably to seek some kind of all-encompassing “way out,” a dramatic escape from modern-day society, if not from reality itself. As Wright put it, in words that ring anew in the post-Trump era: “Whether he’ll follow some gaudy hysterical leader who’ll promise rashly to fill the void in him, or whether he’ll come to an understanding with the millions of his kindred fellow workers under the trade unions or revolutionary guidance depends upon the future drift of events in America” (522).

It would also depend, crucially in Wright’s view, on the methods of pedagogical *praxis* which the revolutionary guides themselves employed.

Clearly then, while Bigger Thomas may share with Lenin a “deep sense of exclusion” amidst the trappings of Western capital and empire, the way in which this sense develops for Bigger in *Native Son* is drastically different from the paths taken by his cosmopolitan revolutionary forebears. Bigger’s life in Depression-era Chicago, as Wright reveals it, is infamously limited, in terms of time, space, and political opportunity. The novel opens in a suffocating, rat-infested South Side kitchenette where Bigger lives with his two siblings and mother, proceeds through the luxurious yet fatally tight confines of the Dalton family home where, after his first day on the job as chauffeur, Bigger accidentally suffocates and then brutally disposes of the body of Mary Dalton, and ends in the cell of a prison where he awaits electrocution for his crime. While Bigger at one point is handed a stack of left-wing pamphlets by a Communist, Jan Erlone – Mary Dalton’s lover – he never reads them, and most of his sense of the world outside the South Side ghetto, including his sense of who the “Communists” are, comes from depictions in anti-communist Hollywood film newsreels.³ To say the least, Bigger never gets much of a chance to link this deep sense of exclusion to a positive revolutionary vision or organization (at least not until his “Fate” is cast and he is locked on death row).

Crucially absent from Bigger’s horizon is the left internationalist perspective that was so crucial to Wright’s own radicalization. For Wright, as he suggests throughout HBWB, as well as in his memoir *Black Boy/American Hunger*, grasping “the Bigger Thomas reaction” immediately in his own life was not enough to reveal the “revolutionary” potential of this “impulse.” Equally

² Nathaniel Mills usefully explores this Lenin-Gorky anecdote in his 2019 contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright*, “Marxism, Communism, and Richard Wright’s Depression-Era Work,” pp. 58-73. Edited by Glenda R. Carpio. Mills’ findings are of great interest, but do not speak to the subjective implications addressed here.

³ When Bigger asks his friend Jack who the Communists are early in the novel, Jack replies: “Damn if I know. It’s a race of people who live in Russia, ain’t it?” (36).

crucial was the recognition that his own immediate response represented a more general phenomenon that “transcended national and racial boundaries.” The “Bigger Thomas reaction,” then, only became revolutionary by *moving beyond itself*, by learning that it was not alone. Shorn of such internationalism, or other means of bridging a broader solidarity, Wright understood that a sense of “deep exclusion” could lead to the paralysis of cynicism, the short-lived release of consumerism, sexism, alcohol, or violence – even the destructive draw of fascism. Indeed, Wright is clear in HBWB that he sees the stamp of Bigger Thomas not only on blacks who turn towards Marcus Garvey as a nationalist savior, but among those who look up to Japanese imperialists as proof non-white people can really “do something.” Notably, he saw the Bigger Thomas trend at work among whites as well, including in Nazi Germany, where masses were then turning to Hitler in part to fill the void created by a sense of social exclusion. As Wright puts it, “I made the discovery that Bigger was not black all the time; he was white too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere,” a discovery that Wright describes as “the pivot of my life; it altered the complexion of my existence” (514).

II. “The Bigger Thomas Reaction”: Gazing on a World that Looks Back

Notably, Wright explicates Bigger’s subjectivity as characterized by the “feeling of looking at things with a painful and unwarrantable nakedness.” The syntax here is admittedly ambiguous – to whom does the “nakedness” belong, the *things looked at*, or the *one who is looking* at them? – but Wright’s reflexive phrasing is deliberate and dialectical. He thus suggests not only that Bigger is looking at things with the sharpened clarity of an outsider before whom imperial accumulations stand revealed (‘in all their nakedness’), but also that, by looking upon these accumulations, Bigger is made to feel *himself* naked – vulnerable, exposed – in a way that induces suffering and confusion. The “Bigger Thomas reaction” here involves looking out on a world that one “did not make or own” in a way that does not so much illuminate the world being *looked at*, as intensify the feeling of vulnerability in the *looker*. To be subject to the “Bigger Thomas reaction,” then, is not merely to feel excluded from the towering monuments of empire, but to feel that exclusion so intensely that it *hurts*, so that one’s own gaze threatens to buckle and boomerang from a means of empowerment to a source of compounding pain and paralysis. For Bigger Thomas, to look on the world is to become exposed and vulnerable in its eyes – as if it’s the *world* that is doing the looking, turning him into a frozen *object* rather than a seeing *subject*.

How much of the characterization above can be applied to Lenin or Gorky is uncertain.⁴ But it clearly has great pertinence to understanding the reactions of Bigger Thomas himself in *Native Son*. Wright elaborates further in HBWB on how alienation compounded oppression for urbanized African-Americans, writing that “Because blacks were so *close* to the very civilization which sought to keep them out, because they could not *help* but react in some way to its incentives and prizes, and because the very tissue of their consciousness received its tone and timbre from the strivings of that dominant civilization, oppression spawned in them a myriad of reactions.” Many of these responses, he emphasizes, risk being distorted by the very thing they are rebelling

⁴ Lenin, after all, spent much of his time in London conducting research *inside* those British libraries. Interestingly, Nate Mills has tracked down the likely textual source of Wright’s recollected “pamphlet,” finding that the London figures depicted there were in fact not Gorky and Lenin, but Gorky and Leon Trotsky, a provocative discovery to be sure.

against (511, emphasis in original).⁵ This combination of being “so *close*” to a civilization and yet so deeply *excluded* from it presented a particular problem, with serious obstacles for would-be revolutionaries.

Were such obstacles insurmountable? Does *Native Son* suggest in the end that Bigger’s intimate exclusion from white racist capitalist America is so deep, his gaze so alienated, his existential hunger “to do something” so distorted, that he is a lost cause as far as the would-be revolutionary organizers and radical artists – the Lenins and Gorkys – of the world are concerned? Is Bigger’s movement from the suffocating kitchenette that opens Book One (“Fear”) to the death-house cell that closes Book Three (“Fate”) doomed from the start?⁶ A long-running critical tradition of reading the novel as deterministic “naturalism” would seem to say, yes.

But Wright suggests otherwise. In HBWB, he makes clear that he is not merely writing in order to *warn* the world *about* Bigger Thomas, but in order to *win the Biggers over* as well. He states that his aim in *Native Son* was to “creat[e] with words a scheme of images and symbols” that could “enlist the sympathies, loyalties, and yearnings of millions of Bigger Thomases of every land and race” (520). Bigger thus remained for Wright not merely a frightening figure to disturb and awaken America, but an intended *audience* as well. Bigger was then not just an *object*, but a potential *subject*, whose attitudes and allegiance Wright, as communist writer and activist, was actively trying to shape.⁷ “Here, I felt, was *drama*,” Wright wrote, “Who will be the first to touch off the Bigger Thomases in America, both white and black?” (522). Contrary to the title “Fate” that ends Book Three, Bigger was shaped not by fixed *determinations*, but by dynamic *contradictions*, competing tendencies, which, if grasped, Wright wagered, could be worked *through*, enabling communists (and the oppressed themselves) to unleash new creative revolutionary force in the world.⁸ Wright aspired not merely to record this drama, but to intervene upon its stage.

⁵ Wright here offers a fresh take on the enduring trope of *double-consciousness*. But here the notion of racialized split subjectivity is characterized by tension and contradiction more than epistemic privilege.

⁶ The latter is the position taken by Abdul R. JanMohamed in his fascinating study of *Native Son* in his book, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death*. (Duke University Press, 2005). “If the novel opens with Bigger in a death-cell and ends with him in a different kind of death-cell, then the entire novel can be said to map the movement from one form of death to another. As I see it, then, *Native Son* is not about the development of character, or the tragic fate of the protagonist, or the unmitigating cruelty of an impersonal social system that crushes helpless individuals, and so forth, but about the need for the protagonist and the narrator to come to consciousness regarding the structure and function of the threat of death as a form of coercion” (84-5). I will deal with JanMohamed’s study of Wright elsewhere.

⁷ In *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, Wright praises the creativity of the urban Black proletarian social layer from which Bigger Thomas is drawn – as well as the tragedy he saw in its untapped potential – when he writes of the youth at the South Side Boys’ Club: “Each day black boys between the ages of eight and twenty-five came to swim, draw, and read. They were a wild and homeless lot, culturally lost, spiritually disinherited, candidates for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories, and the electric chair of the state’s death house. For hours I listened to their talk of planes, women, guns, politics, and crime. Their figures of speech were as forceful and colorful as any ever used by English-speaking people. I kept paper and pencil in my pocket to jot down their word-rhythms and reactions...The Communists who doubted my motives did not know these boys, their twisted dreams, their all-too-clear destinies; and I doubted if I would ever be able to convey to them the tragedy I saw here” (341).

⁸ Wright gives a sense in HBWB of how he saw Bigger’s contradictory attitudes as potentially inclined towards fascism when, reflecting on contemporary developments in Nazi Germany in “How Bigger Was Born,” he remarks, “And I could hear Bigger Thomas standing on a street corner in America expressing his agonizing doubts and chronic suspicions thus: ‘I ain’t going to trust nobody. Everything is a racket and everybody is out to get what he

Likewise, Wright wrote *Native Son* for those fellow communists and organizers whose stated aim was to connect with and catalyze (“touch off”) this radically contradictory, alienated, and dislocated layer of contemporary U.S. society.⁹ Certainly, from Wright’s point of view, there was plenty of corrective work to be done if the Communist Party was to reach the Bigger Thomases of the USA.¹⁰ In his memoir *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, for instance, Wright recalls the “vast distance [that] separated the agitators from the masses,” during his time in Chicago, “a distance so vast that the agitators did not know how to appeal to the people they sought to lead.” Despite their oppression, he observed, the Negro masses were often not ready for revolution in the way that Communists assumed. “I was in and out of many Negro homes each day,” he writes, referring to his experience working as a life-insurance salesman, “and I knew that the Negroes were lost, ignorant, sick in mind and body” (294). Wright’s point here is not that the black masses were incapable or uninterested in revolutionary politics – far from it.¹¹ The point was rather that the task of revolutionary organizing was trickier than generally understood, and *the mode of appealing to and engaging these alienated masses mattered*. To be effective, organizers needed to understand the terrain, to reach the masses *where they were actually at*, not where they hoped or imagined them to be.

In *BB/AH*, Wright retrospectively spelled out his revolutionary literary project in terms of his attempt to reach two different audiences at once:

The Communists, I felt, had oversimplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead. In their efforts to recruit masses, they had missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner. I would make voyages, discoveries, explorations with words and try to put some of that meaning back. I would address my words to two groups. I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them (320).

In light of such comments, it becomes reasonable to read *Native Son* as, among other things, a critical intervention at the level of communist methods of praxis, offering imaginative insights as to what would work and what would not when it came to attempts to relate conscious left politics to the Bigger Thomases of the world.

can for himself. Maybe if we had a true leader, we could do something.’ And I’d know that I was still on the track of learning about Bigger, still in the midst of the modern struggle for solidarity among men” (519).

⁹ Wright’s use of the words “touch off” here is significant, implying a more or less external relationship between potential political organizers and the social basis of Bigger.

¹⁰ Nonetheless, it warrants mentioning that the decade Wright spent in the CPUSA remains arguably the most productive of his life. See James Smethurst, “After Modernism: Richard Wright Interprets the Black Belt” in the collection *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, Eds. Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹¹ Wright’s journalism for the pro-Communist *Daily Worker* from 1937-38 – years that he was also working on the drafts of *Native Son* – documents the broad mass engagement with the Communist party that he witnessed in Harlem. See *Byline, Richard Wright: Articles from The Daily Worker and New Masses*. Edited by Earle Bryant (University of Missouri Press, 2015).

Wright's project relates to the problem of Bigger Thomas on two levels. On the one hand, he seeks to map the "possibilities and limits" (Prial) of Bigger's subjectivity, a consciousness which, as critics of the novel have astutely noted, is torn between "vague" and reified black nationalism, individualism, and a fitful but developing non-racialized perspective that suggests a potentially more collective mode of be(com)ing.¹² On the other hand, through detailed depictions of Bigger's interactions with the left-wing figures Jan Erlone and Boris Max, Wright traces the variously effective and ineffective ways that would-be progressives relate to that subjectivity. In what follows, I will examine the reciprocal illumination of these dialectical poles: oppressed subjectivity and red pedagogy.

Concerning subjectivity, I build on the "Bigger Thomas reaction" to explore an important neglected dimension of the novel: the contradiction Bigger experiences between *looking* and being *looked at*. This tension, between *keeping one's guard up* (in the face of a hostile world) and *fully grasping the nature of one's situation* (so that that world might be consciously transformed), structures Bigger's subjectivity in important ways.¹³ We might frame this as an existential contradiction *between protecting oneself and being "swept out of oneself."* This vexed subjectivity in turn has important implications for our second pole, of red pedagogy.

III. "That's *Their* Chicago"

Considering the importance that Wright gives to Lenin & Gorky in London, it is surprising that scholars have yet to notice that this scene is quite literally paralleled in the text of *Native Son* itself, at least *twice*, once in Book One and once in Book Three. In a sense, Jan Erlone, near the beginning of the novel, and Boris Max, near its end, each take a turn at playing the role of Lenin to Bigger's Gorky. Both outspoken leftists figuratively (and literally) refer Bigger to the skyline of Chicago, attempting to inspire him with the possibilities implied by the distant cityscape.¹⁴

¹² See Grace Prial's insightful unpublished essay, "Bigger's Potential" for an excellent analysis of the persistent barriers to Bigger's developing collective consciousness. A compelling but considerably more optimistic account of Bigger's overcoming of such barriers can be found in Anthony Dawahare's essay "Native Son and the Dialectics of Black Experience" in *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, Ed. Craven and Dow (Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹³ Here again we can locate an alternative notion of *double-consciousness*, framed now not merely as a tension between looking on the world as a "Negro" on the one hand, and as an "American" on the other (the classic formulation from W. E. B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk*) but in terms of the tension between immediate (individual) survival, on the one hand, and the aspiration to social (collective) transformation, on the other.

¹⁴ Arguably there is a third such scene in *Native Son* as well: the scene where Bigger and his friend Gus "play white" prior to their "gang" meeting at the pool hall. Though lacking the explicit gesture to the city's towering buildings, the scene parallels Lenin and Gorky's sarcastic dialogue. Gus and Bigger sit looking up at the city sky, briefly discuss their racialized position in the world, and then enter into a role-playing dialogue, a game they have clearly played many times before. It involves talking through "an imaginary telephone transmitter" (19) to one another as they impersonate variously important ruling-class whites, from a "General" to the "President" to industrialist J.P. Morgan. Their ironic banter demonstrates a close familiarity with the empire in which they live, combined with the feeling of radical exclusion. They express both cynical irreverence, as well as resentment and envy towards the "whites" they mock. Interestingly, though laughter runs through their satirical exchange, Bigger quickly becomes unable to sustain the ironic perspective that the game requires. He breaks the game off suddenly and turns the conversation in a more serious direction. There appears in Bigger still a longing for the things in the "white" world, and a bitter resentment for being barred from them. His mockery of that world is laced with an intolerable fantasy-desire for it.

But crucially, as we shall see, whereas Wright's Lenin turns to Gorky in sarcastic *disidentification* from the London skyline – “Here is *their* Big Ben. There is *their* Westminster Abby. There is *their* museum” – bonding the two communists together as outsiders *against* the towering symbols of capital and empire – Bigger's interlocutors make rather different uses of the urban skyscape. Both Jan and Max encourage Bigger to see a positive, abstract hope in the sublime urban horizon, imploring him to see those buildings as symbols of progressive aspiration. If Lenin and Gorky in London suggest a radical sensibility that is rooted in a rejection of the valued monuments of Western capitalist empire, Jan and Max's pedagogical skylines suggest an American Left that continues to seek meaning and motive in the luster of capital's heights, as if *there* lie the prizes to be struggled for and (re)claimed. If Lenin and Gorky look to the London skyline as the *past* achievements of a hostile civilization, Jan and Max point to the Chicago as if it still contains a figure for Bigger's *future*.

And in both cases, Bigger ain't havin' it.

Just as importantly, Jan and Max's turn to the would-be utopian skyline, and the communist horizon it ostensibly represents, comes at the expense of attending to more immediate realities of Bigger's present subjective state. Bigger's consciousness, as Wright painstakingly details it, is shaped by immediate obstacles as well as hidden openings that suggest new, transformative possibilities. *Talked over* rather than *listened to*, however, Bigger's subjective reactions doom such grandiose pedagogical designs. As we will see in the close readings below, both 'utopian skyline' moments, in different ways, signal the subjective distance existing between Bigger and his would-be emancipatory interlocutors. The rush to invoke the future comes at the expense of paying attention to the terrain of the present.

These skylines may sincerely appear to Jan and Max to represent revolutionary openings. But for Bigger, Wright suggests, they aren't accessible in the same way – at least not yet. At best, they are opaque; at worst, such sweeping appeals alienate him further from these aspiring comrades, prompting in him defensive subjective responses (to which we shall return below).

The distance Wright presents, however, is not only a matter of embedded objective social-historical determinants or racial difference; it is also a matter of (successful or unsuccessful) radical *pedagogy* and communist *praxis*. Depending on the approach employed, Wright suggests, such red praxis has the potential to unleash the creative revolutionary hopes of oppressed people like Bigger, but also to stifle them, sending potentially insurgent energies to flow in other (less constructive) directions.

IV. The Walled Horizon with Jan and Mary: “What a World to Win!”

The first such skyline moment occurs just hours into Bigger's first day on the job as chauffeur for the wealthy white Dalton family. Driving along Chicago's Outer Drive, progressive fellow-traveler Mary Dalton (whom Bigger will accidentally but brutally suffocate 100 pages later) and her Party-member boyfriend, Jan Erlone, point Bigger toward the beauty of the Chicago shoreline:

“This is a beautiful world, Bigger,” Jan said, turning to him. “Look at that skyline!”...“We’ll own all that some day, Bigger,” Jan said with a wave of his hand. “After the revolution it will be ours. But we’ll have to fight for it. What a world to win, Bigger! And when that day comes, things’ll be different. There’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor.” (77-78)

Who could deny the appeal of such a vision! But while Jan and Mary are consumed with its beauty – by the 1930s the Drive was famous for its towering hotels and giant mansions – Wright’s description of Bigger at this same moment implies he cannot join them in their aesthetic-utopian contemplation. Instead, Bigger appears intensely concerned with his own immediate socio-spatial relations with these two strangely and suddenly familiar young white people. A newly hired chauffeur suddenly wedged in the front seat between his two ostensible passengers – Jan has taken the wheel from him at this point – Bigger feels as if he is “sitting between two vast white seeming walls” (77).

Wright starkly contrasts the free-ranging gaze of Jan and Mary at this moment with Bigger’s own: “Bigger looked without turning his head; he just rolled his eyes. Stretching to one side of him was a vast sweep of tall buildings flecked with tiny squares of yellow light.” (78). What looks like it is ‘right there’ for Jan and Mary – “That Sky!” “And that water!” (77) – for Bigger appears peripheral at best. The “vastness” of the skyline registers, but its beauty and utopian meaning – not so much. (We can almost hear Bigger thinking: “So that’s *their* Chicago.”)

In the face of ostensibly inclusive utopian horizons, Bigger feels not freed, but frozen, not welcomed, but walled off. Sitting between Jan and Mary, “His arms and legs were aching from being cramped into so small a space, but he dared not move” (78). Jan and Mary aim to help Bigger *see* the utopian horizon, but Bigger is depicted as immediately trapped in a realm of *feeling* about which his leftist would-be friends seem altogether oblivious. The immediate appearance of racialized social relations, Wright suggests, blocks Bigger from seeing the more distant social possibilities that his would-be comrades seek to “show” him; he can barely even let himself look. At the same time, Wright’s above description of Mary and Jan as, “white *seeming* walls” to Bigger, communicates that its appearances are not simply realities, even if they frame the latter in important ways.¹⁵

What is it exactly that bars Bigger from taking a better look at Jan and Mary’s horizon? Interestingly, at this moment, it is not a fear of direct racist reprisal or job loss that spawns Bigger’s feeling of ocular paralysis. This sort of immediate fear does (quite reasonably) structure Bigger’s

¹⁵ It’s important to note that Bigger’s initial encounter with Jan and Mary is already mediated, not only by the couple’s rather patronizing, presumptuous, and perhaps unconsciously racist conduct, but also by anticommunist mass culture. Just prior to beginning his job at the Daltons, Bigger watches a Hollywood film at the local movie theater – a regular part of his routine, we are led to believe – taking in a newsreel featuring none other than Mary Dalton and her new Communist boyfriend Jan. Depicted by the newsreels as a symbol of white wealth gone wild, Mary exists for Bigger first as an object of film-facilitated, racially forbidden fantasy. Jan on the other hand is framed for Bigger as a derided “red” with whom Mary has taken up despite her parents’ wishes. The dream machine of Hollywood is already shown to be at work on Bigger – training him in specular desire and anticommunism – well before either Mary or Jan so much as open their mouths. While this does not excuse Mary and Jan’s often presumptuous or even naively racist behavior towards Bigger, it conditions his response.

first responses to Mary back at the Dalton house – when she insists on provocatively performing her newfound pro-union politics right in front of her father, Bigger’s employer. But by the time Jan enters the car, the situation has changed. As Wright underscores, Bigger “knew that they would not have cared if he had made himself more comfortable [in the car between them], but his moving would have called attention to himself and his black body. And he did not want that,” adding, “These people made him feel things that he did not want to feel” (78).

Critics have long noted the irony, that in their attempts at anti-racist camaraderie, Jan and Mary paradoxically make Bigger feel his blackness even more. Wright drives the point home:

...they made him feel his black skin by *just standing there and 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 a black skin...*He felt naked, transparent*; he felt that this white man, 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. (76, emphasis added)

Clearly, part of the blame here falls on Jan and Mary, whose forward gestures of friendship – however well-intended – too often resemble orders rather than offers. “Don’t say *sir* to me,” as Jan paradoxically insists (75). But compounding this awkwardness is a fateful paradox: by addressing Bigger as a member of the “Negro” people, even in solidarity, Jan and Mary call attention to that inequality which they ostensibly want to abolish. Their anti-racist insistence, rather than dissolving racial boundaries, appears to rigidify them further.

Moreover, by making race impossible to ignore, Jan and Mary deprive Bigger of a buffer zone he has learned to rely upon, a space of disavowal that, as a “Negro,” allows him to occupy his oppressed position without being deprived of dignity altogether. We might think of this space in terms of the driver’s seat, where the chauffeur generally is forced – but also *allowed* – to sit alone. Jan and Mary literally spill into this space – Jan even takes the wheel, an act that does not liberate Bigger from the burden of his work so much as it strips him of the space that makes that burden bearable.

As Jan steers the car into the Black Belt, “past tall buildings holding black life” (79),¹⁶ what tears at Bigger is not so much an immediate fear about what may be said or done to him, but rather his anxiety about what Jan and Mary are *thinking* (and what they might *see*). “Bigger knew that they were thinking of his life and the life of his people” – a prospect that fills him with an immediate impulse to obliterate viewed and viewer alike: “Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all of the strength of his body and in some strange way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out – with himself and them in it” (80).¹⁷ Bigger’s searing desire here, echoed across the novel, is to be “left alone” – a demand which often has less to do with physical safety than with Bigger’s deep desire

¹⁶ It is notable, and ironic, that Jan does not gesture towards *these* tall building during his sweeping skyline speech.

¹⁷ It is worth pointing out that the verb “to blot out” recurs frequently throughout the novel, marking it as a key figure for Wright and for Bigger in *Native Son*.

to not have people “looking inside of him” (92). He aims to keep his life from being made into an object of another’s gaze or thought.

As they drive, Jan’s talk broaches a range of topics, but Bigger registers not so much the *content* of the speech as its *tone*. He “listened to the tone of their voices, to their strange accents, to the exuberant phrases that flowed so freely from their lips” (77). In contrast to such exuberance, in his obligatory replies, Bigger strives for *tonelessness*. Pressed to speak, he “groped for neutral words, words that would convey information but not indicate any shade of his own feelings” (83).¹⁸ Paradoxically, Bigger seeks to assert himself in this overwhelming situation by making himself appear to be little more than an object. He does not want them to see him looking and so suppresses outward signs of feeling.

It is not an isolated moment. *Native Son* continually calls attention to Bigger’s fear of having his own feelings exposed before others, a fear which, I would emphasize, is often as much about Bigger protecting *himself* psychologically from what he fears that exposure may trigger in *him*, as it is about how *others* may treat him as a result of the exposure. The threat of having others “look inside of him” is double: not only that they may wrongfully judge what they “see,” but also that they may force Bigger *himself* to confront realities that he would rather ignore – making his present “tough” stance of denial and disavowal untenable. Bigger’s demand to be “left alone” thus encompasses both a fear of the *shame* that may result from being seen and judged harshly, but also a fear of the *despair* he may feel if he allows the gaze of (even ostensibly sympathetic) others to penetrate (or dissolve) the shield of cynical disavowal that has, up until now, allowed him to maintain a certain subjective inner distance from the oppression that so tightly constrains his life.

Notably, this fear of shame and despair is not limited to Bigger’s relations with strange or radical white folks like Jan and Mary (though race, class, and unfamiliarity compound the matter). It extends also to Bigger’s relations with his own family and friends. In the morning kitchenette scene that opens *Native Son*, for instance, Wright shows Bigger “acting tough” not only to keep from revealing his feelings to his family members, but also to protect *himself* from the potentially overwhelming flood that may ensue if he allows suppressed emotions to manifest:

He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. *He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair.* So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment 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 (9, emphasis added).

This fear of being “swept out of himself” persists as a driving force for Bigger. It entails a double-hardening – an “iron reserve” (a “curtain,” a “wall”) towards *others*, coupled with an “even more

¹⁸ Throughout *Native Son*, Wright repeatedly calls readers’ attention to the way that Bigger is highly attuned to the *tone* of the voices of those who address him, including at moments when his radical would-be friends and allies are most concerned with imparting to him particular radical *contents*.

exacting” policing of his *own* self-consciousness. The need to shield the ‘self’ over-determines the relationship to the ‘other,’ whether that other is black or white.¹⁹

Wright thus suggests that Bigger’s fear of what he may *feel* if he truly *looks* at the world around him (and admits what he sees), serves as a screen that keeps him from really looking – or, short of that, from *allowing others to see* that he is looking – in the first place. (After all, if another sees that he is looking, he may no longer be able to deny what he has seen, what he knows, but pretends not to.) Thus, beyond the surface facts of being confused by what Jan and Mary want from him, offended by their presumptuousness, or doubtful of their anti-racist sincerity after a life of past mistreatment by whites, Bigger’s resistance to Jan’s Chicago communist horizon expresses a deeper anxiety: an unconscious recognition that to admit such utopian dreams would be to confront a painful reality – perhaps more than Bigger can bear. After all, measured against the liberated waterfront of the future, “the tall buildings holding black life” on the South Side, including his own family’s cramped rat-infested kitchenette, must appear all the more intolerable.

Safer, then, not to really *look*.

V. With Boris Max: Hope Stuck in the Loop

If Mary and Jan’s lakeshore skyline marks Bigger’s blinkered introduction to an abstract communist horizon, a similar utopian impasse closes the novel as Bigger awaits execution. Convicted of the rape and murder of Mary Dalton, sentenced to death, and with his final appeal to the Governor denied, Bigger sits in his cell with his Labor Defender lawyer Boris Max as his last earthly visitor. Bigger frantically seeks guidance – *How* can he grasp the meaning of his life? *How* can he die with dignity? – and Max seeks to bridge the “gulf of silence.” He beckons Bigger one last time to the window of his cell, which overlooks the “tips of the sun-drenched buildings in the Loop” in the distance.

“See all those buildings, Bigger?” Max asked, placing an arm about Bigger’s shoulders. He spoke hurriedly, as though trying to mold a substance which was warm and pliable, but which might soon cool.

“Yeah, I see ‘em...”

“You lived in one of them once, Bigger. They’re made out of steel and stone. But the steel and stone don’t hold ‘em together. You know what holds them buildings together, Bigger? You know what keeps them in their place, what keeps them from tumbling down?”

Bigger looked at him, bewildered.

“It’s the belief of men. If men stopped believing, stopped having faith, they’d come tumbling down.” (497-8).

¹⁹ Another crucial unfolding of this subjective dialectic in Bigger comes in the pool hall when he covers up his own fear of crossing the color line by robbing a white-owned store – and also his fear of *admitting* this fear – by projecting those fears onto Gus, scapegoating his friend in front of the gang in order to hide his own compounded sense of vulnerability. (See *Native Son*, 25-31.)

Once again, in stark contrast with Lenin's ironic dis-association from the skyline of London – “Here is *their* Big Ben”; “There is *their* Westminster Abbey” – Max attempts to interpellate Bigger by suggesting: ‘That’s *your* Chicago, the one you used to live in.’ On the basis of this attempted hail, Max then sketches a sweeping class-conscious history, centering on working-class alienation and redemption, as the men who own the buildings “squeeze” the people to the point that they can no longer “believe,” and are pushed to rebel. “The men on the inside of those buildings have begun to doubt, just as you did. They don’t believe any more. They don’t feel it’s their world. They’re restless, like you” (498). Max asks Bigger to see himself in the picture he paints, urging him to find a way to “believe in yourself,” as a part of the broader popular movement that Max sees emerging among the inhabitants of those buildings.

Notably, Wright marks the buildings that Max points to as belonging specifically to *the Loop*, a famous and prominent lake-side district of downtown Chicago. By the 1930s, the Loop was already synonymous with big business, commerce, and shopping, famous for some of the tallest skyscrapers in the world, a symbol of capital accumulation, as well as racial segregation.²⁰ Despite its close physical proximity to the Black Belt, where Bigger Thomas’ family lives, the Loop remained almost exclusively *white*.²¹ Thus, as a place where virtually all-white Chicago meets virtually all-black Chicago, the “sundrenched” buildings of The Loop represent something more (and less) than what Boris Max sees in them. The towering commercial skyscrapers there are most definitely *not*, as Max misleadingly suggests, the sort of buildings that Bigger “once lived in.” Instead, they represent more like what has been referred to as “the [racial] Wall” of Chicago, still to this day, one of the most segregated cities in the United States. For a South Side Black Belt youth like Bigger, the Loop is almost certainly a glaring symbol of exclusion and oppression, a sight to stir long-held racial resentments.²²

And yet Max speaks of “the men inside those buildings” more or less as if they could be stand-ins for Bigger himself – as if they are facing an identical lapse of belief, a shared restlessness, a common feeling that the buildings “aren’t growing anymore,” and thus cannot be “believed in,” a development that, at times, Max seems to lament.²³ But whatever commonality the Loop dwellers may have with Bigger – and it’s clear that Wright himself did believe that the Great Depression was creating a new basis for class solidarity across racial lines – emphasizing it as an *identity* elides

²⁰ Max himself specifically associates the Loop with “bankers” earlier, during his infamous courtroom speech.

²¹ As revealed by a recent district-by-decade demographic maps of Chicago, The Loop, for both “1930” and “1940,” falls in the virtually all-white category of deep purple, signifying that “over 90%” of residents were white during this period. Meanwhile that white wealth of The Loop was located just one to two city districts away from Chicago’s then-growing South Side Black Belt, where “over 90%” of residents were African American. See *The Huffington Post*, January 2013: <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chicago-racial-demographi_n_2575921>.

²² It’s also worth recalling that, when Wright was writing *Native Son*, he was residing not in Chicago but in New York City, living and working as a reporter in Harlem during the very period when city-planners and capitalist boosters were promoting the 1939-40 New York City World’s Fair, with its construction of a new symbolic city district as a celebration of commercial and industrial Progress.

²³ In striking contrast to Max’s tone of lament, Wright’s later comments in “Black Confession,” the early, unpublished drafts of *Black Boy/American Hunger*, suggest how Wright saw the melting of such metaphysical belief in the present order as the precondition for the emergence of a new kind of revolutionary subjectivity: “I felt that society stood firm, had its existence guaranteed, by an act of will on the part of those who live in it. What holds steel and cement together is an act of metaphysics. If millions suddenly decided that they no longer wanted the prizes that the nation holds forth, then, though no one can see it, a profound revolution has happened.” Wright Archives, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

the particularity of Bigger's Black proletarian position. No wonder Bigger's first reaction after the speech is to look at Max, "bewildered." Underlining the disconnect, Wright describes Bigger as "gazing in the direction of the buildings; but he did not see them. He was trying to react to the picture Max was drawing, trying to compare that picture with what he had felt all his life" (499). The pictures don't match up. Unlike the proverbial People, squeezed to redeem the Buildings with restored Belief, Bigger Thomas never had belief or belonging in those buildings to begin with.

This geographic-symbolic disconnect signals a significant gap between Bigger and Max – at a desperate moment of attempted connection. Max's casting of the Loop as a universal allegorical tableau for working-class life in the city (and by extension in the modern world) misses the mark. Max implores Bigger to embrace his feelings as part of a larger social movement: "Who will win?" he predicts, "The side that feels the most...That's why y-you've got to b-believe in yourself, Bigger..." But the appeal hits a wall; "Max's head jerked up in surprise when Bigger laughed" (500). Max attempts to paint Bigger an optimistic and inclusive horizon of dialectical struggle – past Progress, that turns to Stagnation, only finally to lay a basis for the Redemption of rising Class Conflict and Revolution²⁴ – but the very buildings that he points out to frame his moving mural, for someone in Bigger's position, risk reinforcing a radical (and racial) exclusion.

One can almost hear Bigger thinking (channeling Lenin from London): 'That's *their* Loop, Mr. Max.'

This moment – this speech, this *laughter* – marks a turning point in Max and Bigger's last conversation, prompting Bigger to launch into his infamous final speech, an affirmation of "belief" in himself, a declaration that professes not at all the type of belief – or for that matter, the type of *self* – that Max hopes to inspire. "What I killed for, I *am*!" Bigger notoriously exclaims, "What I killed for must have been *good*!" – and Max's eyes fill with "horror." But in light of our above discussion, is it any wonder that Bigger's main response to Max's speech is not a surging sense of solidarity with other poor and working-class people struggling to "believe and to make the world live again" (499), but rather a retreat into a tough posture of racialized individualist self-certainty in the face of a hostile world? Boris Max points Bigger to the giant white wall of Chicago, asking him to *believe in himself* in its shadow. Bigger exclaims after laughing: "Aw, I reckon I believe in myself...I ain't got nothing else...I got to die" (500). Bigger comes away from Max's final speech turning not outward to the world but inward to his "self," which, he declares, is "all I've got." He expresses a reaffirmed – and I would argue *feigned* – certainty that, in light of the deeply alienating picture Max has painted, his killing(s) "must have been good." Arguably, Max's Loop speech not only fails to help Bigger identify with the progressive/populist spirit of working-class struggle; it sends Bigger retreating back into his tough, cynical shell of "self."²⁵

²⁴ Boris Max's name seems worth a brief comment. Not only does his long lecturing approach risk *boring* his listener, but Max's skyscraper speech can be understood as trying to mechanically *maximize* the present opportunity, by attempting to paint a rapid totalization in Bigger's moment of need. As Wright notes: "[Max] spoke hurriedly, as though trying to mold a substance which was warm and pliable, but which might soon cool." For a discussion of the importance of Jan's last name "Erlone" for Wright, see my article, "The Makings of a Heroic Mistake: Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," Communism, and the Contradictions of Emergent Subjectivity" in *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group*, Vol. 30 #1: <<https://mediationsjournal.org/articles/heroic>>.

²⁵ Bigger's parting words however, "Tell...Tell Mister...Tell Jan, hello..." (502), suggests that Bigger has still not closed down entirely, though the significance of this parting comment seems lost on Max. Whether Max will pass the message on to Jan remains uncertain.

Tragically, this comes just after Bigger has shown signs of shedding that shell.

VI. The Need for a Shield in the Face of Fear: Hope or Hate?

All through Book Three (“Fate”) Wright depicts Bigger reaching out for a “shield” of either “hate or hope.” Significantly, Wright underscores, if Bigger does not find hope, he will revert to hate: “He had to make a decision: in order to walk to that [electric] chair he had to weave his feelings into a hard shield of either hope or hate. To fall between them would mean living and dying in a fog of fear” (417). Bigger is depicted as in need of some form of existential support in the face of death, but just as Wright saw Bigger as the potential substance of either Communism or Fascism, there is no guarantee that a collective or proto-communist “hope” will fill that void; a reversion to the old “hate” remains a possibility. Bigger’s final words to Max suggest that he is “all right” (500) and will be able to “walk to that chair.”²⁶ But is Bigger’s final shield one of “hate” or of “hope”?

Wright establishes the terms for answering this question explicitly near the opening of Book Three, where he maps the conditions of Bigger’s subjective possibility. Facing almost certain death, Bigger still seeks some kind of social-existential truth that might allow his life (and death) to mean something. He still hungers for something larger than his “self”:

Passively, [Bigger] hungered for another orbit between two poles that would let him live again; for a new mode of life that would catch him up with the tension of hate and love. There would have to hover above him, *like stars in a full sky, a vast configuration of images and symbols whose magic and power could lift him up* and make him live so intensively that the dread of being black and unequal would be forgotten; that even death would not matter, that it would be a victory. This would have to happen before he could look them [his white persecutors] in the face again: *a new pride and a new humility* would have to be born in him, *a humility springing from a new identification with some part of the world in which he lived, and this identification forming the basis for a new hope* that would function in him as pride and dignity (317, emphasis added).

Wright makes the requirement here explicit: for this new hope to take root, Bigger needs a “configuration of images and symbols” that can make him forget the dread of being black and unequal, alongside “a new identification with some part of the world in which he lived.” The former points us towards “the stars in the sky,” and to “magic;” the latter suggests a more worldly, material(ist) social grounding. Yet Wright suggests that these two moves are not opposed but related, even mutually dependent, with the “magic” creating a protective (subjective) intensity that can lay the ground for a new (objective) worldly connection. It’s as if racialized dread must be

²⁶ As Bigger elaborates: “I ain’t tryin’ to forgive nobody,” he said, “drown[ing] out” Max’s voice, “I ain’t askin’ for nobody to forgive me. I ain’t going to cry. They wouldn’t let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain’t fair to kill, and I reckon I didn’t really want to kill. But when I begin to feel why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am...” (500-1).

shed – with the help of “images and symbols” – in order to make a new (proto-political) identification with a part of the social world possible. (We should note that this double-demand of ‘magic’ & material, symbolism and social identification is *not* the same as an affirmation of racial identity or nationalism as a transitional stage towards or before socialist class consciousness.)

At the same time, we are repeatedly reminded that, while Bigger is open to and even hungry for the possibility of new hope, this potential is contested, and not only because it vies with the residual and rival ‘shield’ of hate. *Hope also produces its own immanent negation*, as the prospect of human openness itself gives rise to the shadow of a new type of anxiety and vulnerability. To look on the world with hope and upon humanity with this new sense of its possibility brings with it a *risk of despair*, raising the specter of those new hopes being betrayed: in short, *doubt*.²⁷

Thus, after the Ku Klux Klan burns a cross outside his inquest, prompting Bigger to throw away the crucifix given to him by Rev. Hammond, Wright says of Bigger that “He wanted no more crosses that might turn to fire while still on his chest” (394). This line applies not only to religious belief, nor to the openly terroristic symbolism of the Klan.²⁸ It applies also to the broader dilemma that Bigger faces – a paradox which Wright saw as facing oppressed humanity broadly, and the Left in particular: *a paradox of hope and doubt*. We could frame the paradox as follows: It is not possible (for the Bigger Thomases of the world) to achieve subjective redemption and collective revolution without a leap of faith (namely a belief millions of others will join in that leap). But that very leap makes Bigger vulnerable in a new way, opening the danger of betrayal and despair. Opening oneself up means dropping one’s guard, shedding the defensive armor of a lifetime: macho individualism, nationalist posturing, cynical disavowal, etc. By opening to the possibility and desirability of a greater form of collective meaning, human connection, social transformation, and a liberated future, Bigger simultaneously opens himself to the possibility of betrayal and disappointment of those hopes, *the possibility that the new symbol will ‘burst into flames’ upon his open heart* (a heart open and thus no longer protected by the shield of cynicism).

Thus, even after being stirred by Jan Elrhone’s prison visit (more about which below), and Boris Max’s infectious curiosity during his pretrial questioning, Bigger agonizes: “A small core in him resolved never to trust anybody or anything. Not even Jan. Or Max...” (394). “Was not his old hate a better defense than this agonized uncertainty?” (422). “Was he not heightening the horror of his own end by straining after a flickering hope?” (423). We see Bigger across Book Three grappling more and more consciously (albeit silently) with the cynical “hardness” and related “blindness” that has structured much of his life. When Wright tells us that “If he kept hope from his mind, then whatever happened would seem natural” (443), we must recall Wright’s earlier – denaturalizing – comments on the way that Bigger “acted tough” around his family: “It was the way he was, *he would say*, he could not help it, *he would say*, and his head would wag” (31, emphasis added). The cynicism here is not “natural”; it is performed – there is more to Bigger than he dares to admit – but the suppression of this *more* is part of a long-standing survival strategy. To transcend or transform such a mode, trading in one’s lifelong “shield” for an uncertain utopian aspiration, Wright suggests, is a daunting task. The outcome of such a subjective struggle hangs

²⁷ It is also to introduce a new pain, intensifying the tragedy of one’s own blighted life.

²⁸ Indeed, the lingering appeal of Christian symbols and faith for Bigger in these later moments deserve more attention. Bigger is not as fully outside of such religious feeling as critics tend to assume.

crucially on one's ability to move through the realm of doubt and despair, towards some kind of "new faith." It also depends on *others*, who may (or may not) provide the material and symbolic support that can make revolutionary faith appear as something other than foolishness or suicidal fancy.

So then, Max is not totally wrong-headed in his closing attempts at communication. The goal of his final speech appears to be to restore some sort of belief or faith, which might enable Bigger to stave off despair in the face of death, allowing him to connect his identity to some part of that world beyond himself. To be sure, Wright makes clear that Bigger is in need of such reassurance. "Mr. Max, How can I die?" Bigger demands – prompting Max to launch into his Loop speech (495). But Max attempts to secure Bigger's hope in a place, and through a narrative, that fails to connect. The materiality of the actually-existing city of Chicago, through Bigger's eyes, fails as a bridge to utopia.

Wright makes this clear in earlier scenes. When Bigger contemplates the city on his own in Book Two, the immediate cityscape remains alienated, inaccessible as a utopian horizon. When he looks out on the visible city, his own sense of utopian possibility appears more often blocked than beckoned. In sharp contrast to the ostensibly progressive cityscapes of Max and Jan, Chicago appears to Bigger as a frustrating maze, "a strange labyrinth even when the streets were straight and the walls were square" (278).²⁹ The immediate appearance of the city for Bigger does not link up with the subjective desire for human freedom that has flooded his consciousness in the wake of the horrific killings, killings that have nonetheless 'freed' him – however briefly—from the routine social obligations and the oppressive constrictions that characterize his 'normal' life. The immediately visible world of Chicago does not inspire Bigger with Max's sense of concrete possibility, historic achievement, or human agency, but rather, at best, with the sense of "something missing" (279). If there is a stroke of utopia in it – "some road which, if he had once found it, would have led him to a sure and quiet knowledge" (279) – it is a path that remains hypothetical, and tragically belated. Nor is this sense of inscrutability confined to Bigger's impression of the buildings and streets alone. He views the everyday people around him through a similar lens, unable to believe that they could be capable of becoming the force for rebellion that he himself fitfully desires (129-130). In a sense, it's only when Bigger closes his eyes to the immediate world around him that he can sense the possibility of something greater.

VII. Stirring Bigger's Imagination

Although Bigger's consciousness appears lost in the labyrinth of Chicago, and hemmed in by compounding alienation, there remain fugitive moments in the text, where Wright makes clear that Bigger is on the verge of imaginative breakthrough. Notably, each of these moments follow encounters with his radical allies, Jan Erlone and Boris Max. In marked contrast with these comrades' appeals to distant utopian skylines (discussed in Part I and II of this essay), however,

²⁹ The passage continues, underscoring connections to issues discussed earlier: "But only under the stress of hate was the conflict resolved. He had been so conditioned in a cramped environment that hard words or kicks alone knocked him upright and made him capable of action – action that was futile because the world was too much for him. It was then that he closed his eyes and struck out blindly, hitting what or whom he could, not looking or caring what or who hit back" (278).

speeches which prompt Bigger to harden and retreat, these more intimate conversations stir up something new in Bigger. Often the signs of this stirring manifest only in Bigger's private thoughts *after* his would-be comrades have physically left him. There is little outward sign that Jan or Max even realize the effect of their words. Nonetheless, Wright suggests that it is through *listening* rather than through *speaking*, through *demonstrating solidarity* rather than *explaining reality*, by *asking questions* rather than *making speeches*, that Jan and Max begin to melt Bigger's hard shield, his shell of fear and cynicism. Tender comradeship inspires new possibilities.

Crucially, it is when Jan Erlone approaches Bigger in prison not as a radical lecturer, but rather as a fellow victim of the violence (violence that Bigger himself has perpetuated, though he hardly began it), that Bigger has what Anthony Dawahare calls his "epiphanic moment."³⁰ Jan admits aloud to Bigger the hurt and the hate that have flowed through him since Mary's murder, yet he nonetheless extends Bigger solidarity (in the form of procuring him legal support), even at the cost of making himself a target of hatred from white Chicago society, which clamors for Bigger's blood. Jan models vulnerability and sympathy: he simultaneously foregrounds his own worldly wounding, while refusing to recycle that hurt in the form of hatred. Grieving the loss of Mary, Jan too has become a victim of social forces beyond his control, but he does not respond by blaming Bigger or seeking vengeance against him, instead recognizing that crime's social and historical roots. He extrapolates from his own pain to the pain of millions of Black people in America who have been forced to endure similar or worse losses. Reflecting on his own unwitting complicity with the brutal chain of events that led to Mary's murder, Jan goes so far as to admit before Bigger that the horrible events have offered him a valuable gift, a lesson he has been forced to learn. Bigger is taken aback by the confession: "Did this man believe in him that much?"

Notably, Jan does not come to Bigger in the self-effacing role of the do-gooder or selfless martyr, above the fray, but rather as both bereaved object and empathetic subject of the process underway. He reminds Bigger that others besides himself are being hurt and hated too, but also that having been hurt does not necessarily mean that one must return the favor, tit-for-tat. To be sure, as Dawahare and others have noted, Jan's tenderness contradicts Bigger's previous idea of all white people as constituting a hard united "mountain" of hatred, but it also contradicts the social codes that have ruled Bigger's relations with his friends and family alike. Whereas Dawahare sums up the importance of Jan's prison visits by noting the dialectical materialist lessons Bigger learns (about the existence of non-racist whites even in a racist society), I would stress that Bigger's subjective transformation involves an additional intersubjective dimension: curiosity and compassion help soften his cynicism. Beyond the proof that not all white people are racist, Bigger responds to two crucial things: 1) Jan's alternate model of responding to the world that has so hurt him; and 2) the implied assurance that, should he let down his own guard of hardness and 'go soft,' he will not be alone in doing so.

Nonetheless, in his precarious position, as an emergent oppressed subject, Bigger's steps forward towards belief in an alternative way of life remain uncertain and unstable. Wright underscores how Bigger continues to require some sort of shield to protect himself from the naked, alienating, paralyzing gaze of the world.

³⁰ See Anthony Dawahare's brilliant explication of Bigger's subjectivity in his essay "Richard Wright's Native Son and the Dialectics of Black Experience" in the collection *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, eds. Craven and Dow (65-80).

Might art and symbol bridge the gap?

VIII. Bigger as Incipient Utopian Artist

Too often missed in discussions of *Native Son* is the degree to which Bigger Thomas is not only a source of ‘brutality’ but of creativity as well. True, the infamous characterization of Bigger’s murder(s) as a “creative act” have elicited plenty of commentary. And there is no doubt that Bigger displays ingenuity across Book Two while eluding police. But there remain instances in the novel where Bigger manifests a *different* sort of creativity. His unspoken reflections from prison in Book Three show an emergent facility with symbols and images that has too often been ignored.

Most notable is the sequence of symbols and images that Bigger conjures in the wake of prison visits by Jan and Max (418). Quite unlike his final Loop speech, Max’s attentive pre-trial *questioning* sets loose in Bigger a reciprocal curiosity: “Did those who hated him have in them the same thing Max had seen in him, the thing that had made Max ask those questions?... He wondered if it were possible that after all everybody in the world felt alike” (418). This passionate line of speculation then opens into a sequence of images, symbols which speak powerfully to Bigger’s social and existential predicament. Wright here depicts Bigger as a kind of *incipient radical artist*, a fashioner of images and symbols that function as both a critique of his present social conditions, and, even more strikingly, as utopian figures for a kind of egalitarian collective belonging for which he hungers.

The first of these images involves “a black sprawling prison full of tiny black cells” and spurs in Bigger the critical question: “Why were there so many cells in the world?” (419). While this root cause is never revealed to him, a second image quickly follows, offering one of the great neglected utopian imaginings of this famously nightmarish novel. As Bigger reflects:

How could he find out if this feeling of his was true, if others had it? How could one find out about life when one was about to die? Slowly he lifted his hands in the darkness and held them in mid-air, the fingers spread weakly open. If he reached out with his hands, and if his hands were electric wires, and if his heart were a battery giving life and fire to those hands, and if he reached out with his hands and touched other people, reached out through these stone walls and felt other hands connected with other hearts – if he did that, would there be a reply, a shock? Not that he wanted those hearts to turn their warmth to him; he was not wanting that much. But just to know that they were there and warm! Just that and no more; and it would have been enough, more than enough. And in that touch, response of recognition, there would be union, identity; there would be a supporting one-ness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life. (419-20)

In this striking passage, Bigger imagines a techno-utopian version of Christ’s crucifixion, a kind of battery powered communion, the fire and voltage of the electric chair transmuted from a tool of death into a current of human connection that transcends prison walls. Bigger expresses here his deep need for mutual recognition, for a “supporting one-ness”; he needs to know he is not alone

in his isolation, in his suffering, and in his longing alike. This second image then gives rise to a third:

Another impulse rose in him, born of desperate need, and his mind clothed it in an image of a strong blinding sun, sending hot rays down and he was standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men, and the sun's rays melted away the many differences, the colors, the clothes, and drew what was common and good upward toward the sun... (420)

Paradoxically, Bigger 'clothes' his longing in a mental image of clothes *melting away*. Echoing – and contrasting starkly with – Wright's comments on "the Bigger Thomas reaction" with which we began this essay, Bigger now imagines his nakedness as a shared condition; all (men) are stripped bare, beneath a "blinding sun" – a kind of *solar communism*. Significantly, the power of the sun here is not to illuminate the world as it exists so much as to "melt away" the many apparent distinctions – social and physical – that keep people apart on earth. Where Jan and Max's speeches have attempted to spur a sense of external utopian possibility and working-class unity in Bigger by gesturing to the horizon of the urban skyline, Bigger's utopian imagination turns inward but reaches higher, to the sun itself as the great egalitarian leveler. Here, it would seem, is a moment where Bigger accesses the "magic" of images that might sustain a new and hopeful form of social subjectivity. Symbolism offers a bridge from desperation to solidarity.

But again, this uncharacteristic symbolic effusion triggers a counter-reaction. "Was he foolish in feeling this?" Bigger wonders, "Could he trust bare, naked feeling this way?... Had he been this blind all along?" (420). (*Blind*, we might add, ironically, to the utopian possibilities of *blindness*.) Once again, there is a tentative quality to his subjective leaps: suspicions, fears, doubts persist. Even with the support of such utopian imaginings, the existential burden seems too much to bear alone. That next link to "*a new identification with some part of the world*," which Wright theorizes as essential, remains elusive.

In the novel's final pages, Wright points out Bigger's lack of a common language to communicate with Max: "Their modes of commitment, their symbols and images had been denied him" (422-3). But it's crucial to underscore that Bigger is himself a wellspring of symbols and images, a creator of vivid visions that point towards a kind of collective, egalitarian horizon. Tragically, Bigger never communicates these visions to anyone; even his final death-house conversations with his friends and family remain too shaped by the petrifying gaze of dominant (white, capitalist, state) power to allow his new inklings to manifest aloud. Notably, while his would-be teachers work to get Bigger to see *their* customary symbols and images of revolution, they fail to glean Bigger's own utopian longings. Yes, these comrades do at times stir Bigger to radical visions – and that contribution should not be discounted – but Bigger never gets the chance to show them how, nor to see how his visions might stir and enlighten them in turn.

IX. Conclusion

As suggested by his analysis of the "Bigger Thomas reaction," with which we began, Richard Wright grappled with the idea that for historically oppressed subjects such as Bigger

Thomas, the road to revolutionary transformation was fraught with dangers and difficulties – not only economic, social, and political obstacles, but existential ones as well. The exclusion and social alienation of such racialized, proletarianized, urbanized subjects did not necessarily equip or incline them to respond effectively or collectively to their oppression, however intensely they may experience it. Revolutionary transformation would require, at a minimum, looking frankly and fully at the world, including one’s oppressed position within it, as well as the situation’s latent possibilities. But, as Wright saw the conundrum, it was difficult or impossible to grasp the world with such openness and vulnerability, when you feel you must have your guard up to protect oneself from it. To look fully at the world, as something to be changed, not just endured, thus required a subjective process, a softening of the defensive posture of cynical toughness.

While there is no simple answer to the question of how to accomplish this task, Wright is clear that to convince the Bigger Thomases of the world to drop their guard and ponder the possibility of radical change would require more than gestures to distant utopian skylines. By repeatedly foregrounding far-reaching but faltering radical appeals to such skylines across *Native Son*, Wright calls our attention to the way that revolutionary visions fail to connect with those for whom they are ostensibly meant – not because the oppressed ‘disagree’ with them, but because they fail to bridge a subjective gap. Again and again, Wright shows how the encounter between revolutionary ideas and oppressed subjectivity is mediated by (often racialized) social appearances and existential tensions, both of which in turn shape an emergent subject's *ability to access and to believe in those visions*. For such alienated and oppressed subjects to glimpse distant utopian potential was not only to be instantly buoyed by radical hopes; it was simultaneously to raise doubts and court despair, *consciousness* of oppression adding yet another burden to oppression itself.³¹

Wright suggests that when it comes to “touching off” revolutionary subjectivity in long alienated and historically oppressed people, ‘showing’ the state of the world as it exists (in all its brutally exposed “nakedness”) or as it one day might be (in all its abstract utopian promise) would not be enough. For that hostile world itself threatens to *look back*. And that utopian dream, if embraced, might one day burst into flames. Emergent oppressed subjectivity’s response to utopian visions then could and would in turn be affected, positively or negatively, by the pedagogical approach of radical interlocutors: in a word, by the interpersonal *praxis* that might (or might not) make immediate and palpable – and thus credible – some sense of revolutionary possibilities otherwise too abstract to believe in.

To enlist alienated and oppressed people in the cause of liberation, then, Wright saw communists facing great and often unseen obstacles. In addition to broader concerns about political strategy, a twofold subjective challenge loomed: a revolutionary process, if it were to be effective, needed to help oppressed people *find the courage to look upon the world, shorn of protective shields* that mask and mystify, and to *admit their own deep vulnerability and potential to change*, accepting disturbing and unsettling truths that they might prefer to suppress. To become

³¹ For a vitally dialectical treatment of this crucial pedagogical challenge, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1969, 2005), especially chapter 1, (43-69). Full text here:

<[https://files.libcom.org/files/Paulo%20Freire,%20Myra%20Bergman%20Ramos,%20Donaldo%20Macedo%20-%20Pedagogy%20of%20the%20Oppressed,%2030th%20Anniversary%20Edition%20\(2000,%20Bloomsbury%20Academic\).pdf](https://files.libcom.org/files/Paulo%20Freire,%20Myra%20Bergman%20Ramos,%20Donaldo%20Macedo%20-%20Pedagogy%20of%20the%20Oppressed,%2030th%20Anniversary%20Edition%20(2000,%20Bloomsbury%20Academic).pdf)>.

enlisted in a project of seeing the world as changeable, as a site of hope, not just hate or despair, at the very least, Bigger Thomas needs to know that he is not alone, that what he feels is understood and even shared by others. Only then, Wright suggests, might he find the endurance to look fully on his situation – with all its horrors and its possibility – without the armor of cynical hardness. If only the ‘nakedness’ could be shared, Wright implies, it could become not only bearable, but emancipating.

Another way to put it: Intellectual instruction was vital but would not be enough. A sustaining *faith* would also be required, and that faith required support: in the form of *tender comradely relationships* that model a new way of living, and in *deeply felt symbols* that can support the revolutionary subject even in moments of isolation, doubt, or despair. In both cases, the shedding and transforming of the old ‘*self*’ ultimately depends on the perceived support of *others*. As Wright makes clear, a “new hope” and new collective identity remains possible (indeed, it is already latent) even for the extreme case of Bigger Thomas, but it can only emerge and be sustained if it is supported, socially and symbolically.

Throughout his accounts of Bigger’s interactions with Jan Erlone and Boris Max, Wright continually draws attention to his protagonist’s need for recognition and validation – the sense that someone is really listening to him, and that he is not alone in his anxious humanity. Where such support is present, as in the tender jail scene with Jan, or the pretrial questioning with Max, we see Bigger taking silent steps towards a new mode of subjectivity, one founded on a growing desire for common understanding, shared curiosity, and goodwill between human beings. Where this support is absent, however – and in the end, Boris Max, though well-intentioned, is not ready for the task at hand – Bigger retreats towards his hard shell of “hate.” This indeterminacy of Bigger’s subjectivity corresponds to Wright’s famous comments about whether Bigger could become either Communist or Fascist, depending on the “future drift of events” in America. But as my reading of *Native Son* makes clear, this future drift was not just a matter of external circumstances – ‘objective conditions’ or “the course of future events” – beyond human control; it crucially centered on the methods of *praxis* employed by radical organizers themselves.

As Wright makes clear, left-wing organizers are most helpful in terms of stirring transformation in Bigger not when they make big speeches or gesture to the horizon, but when they manifest *solidarity, empathy, and curiosity*. Such *tender red praxis* intimately contradicts Bigger’s previous experiences with and his dominant assumptions about white people and the world, a world that has often treated him as a mere object and has further compelled him to *make himself appear to be an object* in order to stave off even more unbearable existential despair. It is only when tender comrades begin to treat him as a potential thinking and feeling *subject* (while at the same time *making visible their own object-status* within this world), that they help stir in Bigger something new. Such counterexamples, however fleeting, disrupt the objectifying and paralyzing social gaze in which Bigger has been so long ensnared; new and radical visions begin to take form.

Tragically, Boris Max and Jan Erlone never get to glimpse Bigger’s new utopian stirring. But we readers can, and it is long past time that we attended to such openings in unexpected places. For in 2022, as ever, forging and sustaining revolutionary consciousness and collectivity that can endure – against all odds – remains an ongoing challenge, notwithstanding proliferating dystopian skylines of our projected future. New forms of social alienation, isolation, and fragmentation make

the idea of a global egalitarian revolution more difficult to imagine by the day, even as the need for such a project becomes more pressing than ever. *Native Son*, with its critique of disconnected horizons, its account of tragically unreported revolutionary stirrings, and its recurring emphasis on the importance of tender comradely praxis as the condition for unleashing the suppressed creativity of the oppressed, remains a text full of challenges and inspiration for our times.

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