

RECONSIDERING WHITE LIBERALS IN *NATIVE SON*

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Abstract

This paper examines the novel *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright (1908-1960). When the main character, Bigger Thomas, walks out of Chicago's Black Belt to work as a chauffeur for the Daltons, a family of white liberals, and kills their daughter by accident, he interacts with numerous white characters. Bigger's perspective dismisses the Daltons and other white people as particles of a huge mountain of hate. The only exceptions to this are Jan Erlone and Boris Max, the two communist characters who succeed in establishing their humanity to Bigger and win his trust. This article reconsiders white liberals beyond the way they are presented through Bigger's dominant perspective and the way they are generally seen by critics.

Keywords: white liberals, Richard Wright, *Native Son*, race relations

RECONSIDERANDO A LOS BLANCOS LIBERALES EN *NATIVE SON*

Resumen

Este artículo examina la novela *Native Son* (1940) de Richard Wright (1908-1960). Cuando el protagonista de la novela, Bigger Thomas, traspasa el Cinturón Negro de Chicago para trabajar como chófer para los Dalton, una familia de liberales blancos, y mata a su hija por accidente, interactúa con numerosos personajes blancos. Desde su perspectiva, descalifica a los Dalton y a otros blancos, considerándolos granos de una enorme montaña de odio. Las únicas excepciones a esta visión son Jan Erlone y Boris Max, los dos personajes comunistas que logran transmitir su humanidad a Bigger y ganar su confianza. Este artículo reconsidera a los liberales blancos más allá de cómo los presenta la perspectiva dominante de Bigger y de la forma en que son vistos generalmente por los críticos.

Palabras clave: liberales blancos, Richard Wright, *Native Son*, relaciones raciales

RECONSIDERING WHITE LIBERALS IN *NATIVE SON*

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In the novel *Native Son* (1940), written by Richard Wright (1908-1960), Bigger Thomas's "crossing" of the racial divide to work as a chauffeur for the Daltons, a family of white liberals, and his accidental killing of their daughter Mary brings him into contact with a good number of white characters. Most of these white characters, like the state attorney Mr Buckley, the private investigator Mr Britten and the members of the police force are quite familiar with Bigger. Though he meets some of them for the first time, they represent to Bigger particles of a huge mass which he identifies as white people. We are told in Book II that to "Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark" (Wright 2000: 144). At other occasions Bigger identifies white people in similar terms as a "looming mountain of white hate" or as "vast white walls" (Wright 2000: 318, 99). Indeed, the text of *Native Son* abounds with images which group white people as one mass.

Bigger and his kind know only too well the rules of avoiding the threat of this "natural force": "As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force" (Wright 2000: 144). These rules explain why Bigger and his gang avoid robbing white people, and why Bigger fights his friend Gus to cover his fear of robbing a white shopkeeper. All gang members contemplate the robbery as "a violation of an ultimate taboo" (Wright 2000: 44). Bigger's mastery of these rules enables him in Book II, when he abides by them to the letter, to fool some of the most racist characters in the book, including Britten. When Britten goes over his checklist of attributes which are associated with the stereotype of Negro behaviour and finds that Bigger's behaviour tallies with it very well, he forms a strong conviction that someone like Bigger cannot be responsible for Mary's disappearance or kidnapping. He immediately directs his accusation towards another group, the communists, who represent to him more credible suspects. Joyce A. Joyce and Valerie Smith read Bigger's manipulation of the Daltons and Britten as a liberating act (Joyce 1991: 44; Smith 1987: 180). This manipulation does not last long, however. Alessandro Portelli rightly explains that though initially fooled by Bigger, whites "have no trouble adjusting to the news of his guilt: the stereotypes which power creates of the

oppressed are always flexible and multiple enough to justify all forms of oppression, from paternalism to the electric chair” (1997: 263). We do not need to see Britten recovering from his shock and reconciling Bigger’s embodiment of what Angela Davis calls “the myth of the black rapist”, which is taken for granted at this stage, to his own stereotype of black behaviour (1981: 172-201).

A small number of white characters, however, shock Bigger with the fact that even though they are elements of this “natural force” they are distinct from it. These white characters include the Dalton family and their servant Peggy, the two members of the communist party Jan Erlone and Boris Max, and an unnamed policeman who speaks kindly to Bigger in prison and gives him his newspaper. Though shocked by their difference from other white people, Bigger never manages to see the Daltons as individuals in the way he comes to regard Jan and Max in Book III. This article examines the factors behind the Daltons’ failure to feature as individuals and separate themselves from the huge mass of white people, at least according to Bigger. Indeed, this failure does not seem to be limited to Bigger’s perspective: rather it extends to the way the Daltons are generally perceived by some critics.

Even though Bigger’s initial reaction unifies this small number of white characters by their deviation from what he has learned to categorize as white people, Mr and Mrs Dalton, their daughter and the two members of the Communist Party do not form a congruous group. Mr and Mrs Dalton, as “Christians”, approach black people to help them, and even though their daughter has been influenced by their approach, she approaches Bigger as more of a sympathizer with the Communist Party. Jan and Max help Bigger as declared members of the Communist Party. It is quite significant that though all these white people declare “helping” black people as their objective, their ideological differences never allow them to collaborate, or even contemplate the possibility of working together. They represent two bitterly opposed groups throughout the text. It is possible to suggest that the usual conflict between white racists and white philanthropists is replaced in *Native Son* by a conflict between two approaches to “helping” black people. Even before Mary is killed, both the Daltons and the communists, represented by Jan, offer their help to Bigger, who does not really consider going back to school or joining the Communist Party. This image of the Daltons as “helpers” changes into people seeking revenge, at least according to Max, as soon as Bigger is captured and prosecuted for killing Mary. Meanwhile Jan and Max are confirmed as offering real help to Bigger. With the relative silence of the Daltons, especially in Book III, and the powerful voice of the communists, Max in particular, the Daltons are aligned to the rest of the

“racist” white world, from which they hoped their contribution to black education would set them apart.

Even though Bigger responds negatively to Jan and Mary’s attempt to reach out to him and deal with him as an equal, the text examines a substantial development on the part of both Bigger and Jan. By contrast, Bigger’s attitude towards the Daltons and their daughter never changes or develops. When Mary assures Bigger that Jan’s offer to shake his hand is genuine, Bigger’s response is described as follows:

He flushed warm with anger. Goddamn her soul to hell! Was she laughing at him? Were they making fun of him? What was it that they wanted? Why didn’t they leave him alone? He was not bothering them. Yes, anything could happen with people like these. His entire mind and body were painfully concentrated into a single sharp point of attention. (Wright 2000: 98)

Bigger reluctantly shakes Jan’s hand, and we observe that Mary touches him intentionally and unintentionally several times. In his study of the function of violence in *Native Son*, Robert Butler observes that “*Native Son* dramatizes a bleak environment in which people touch each other only in violence, almost never in love or friendship” (1986: 15). Touching proves quite deadly for both Mary and Bigger, and it causes Jan enough troubles. Indeed, Jan and Mary’s attempt to overlook racial differences serves only to confirm these differences for Bigger. “He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin” (Wright 2000: 98). If we look at this closely, however, we find that Mary and Jan mean to touch in friendship. It is Bigger’s conditioning which interprets this touching otherwise. Moreover, it is circumstances which change this touch into something deadly for Bigger and Mary. One might add that it is Bigger who touches in violence when he kisses Mary in what might be described as an attempt of rape, which is aborted by the entrance of Mrs Dalton into Mary’s bedroom and the killing of Mary.

Unlike Mary, who initiates the contact with Bigger, Jan is given a chance to realize that his and Mary’s approach to Bigger is blind and inefficient even though it is good-intentioned. Jan’s humiliation through being arrested and accused of Mary’s murder provides him with an experience which enables him to understand the depth of Bigger’s problem and the simplistic approach he and Mary have used to approach Bigger as one of them, ignoring the racial codes which Bigger has been forced to abide by all his life. It is only when Jan realizes the depth of the division between the white and the black worlds that he can talk in a language of common experience which Bigger understands. It is the language of pain and suffering. Mary, of course, suffers

more than all, but her “premature” death prevents her from relating what she has learned from suffering. Even her family, who suffer more than Jan and who are given only a brief space to speak, are presented as incapable of learning from their suffering.

Jan’s visit to Bigger’s cell and the conversation that ensues there convince Bigger to take Jan’s offer of friendship and help as genuine. In the presence of Rev Hammond, Jan explains to Bigger:

I was in jail grieving for Mary and then I thought of all the black men who’ve been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery. I thought that if they could stand it, then I ought to. (Wright 2000: 318)

His genuine grief works as atonement for his being part of those hundred millions of white people who have exploited black through slavery and racism. The effect of Jan’s words on Bigger is described as that of an operation on Bigger’s eyes.

Jan had spoken a declaration of friendship that would make other white men hate him: a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet. (Wright 2000: 319)

We are told that Jan is the first man to become a human being to Bigger. The humanity of Jan will be confirmed for Bigger as Bigger sees Jan go through more troubles in court because of his activism. Most of the questions of the coroner to Jan in court centre upon suggesting that Jan is a “nigger lover” and that he has facilitated a sexual encounter between Bigger and Mary in order to recruit Bigger to the Communist Party. Even after it has been established that Bigger is the one who has killed Mary, the coroner tries to present Jan as a traitor to the white community for failing in his role to protect a white woman from a black man, and, even worse, for surrendering her to him. The text concludes with a message from Bigger to Jan through Max: “Tell.... Tell Mister.... Tell Jan hello....” (Wright 2000: 454).

It is also suggested that Max’s Jewish background and his communist ideology enable him to understand what Bigger has gone through and what has made him carry out the killings of both Mary and his girlfriend Bessie. The mature Max does not repeat Jan and Mary’s mistake. It also helps that Max is introduced by Jan, whom Bigger has already begun to trust. In his professional role as a lawyer, Max is more privileged than Jan: he spends more time with Bigger and manages to win his trust and make him talk freely. Indeed, the way Bigger talks to Max is almost like the way he talks to his

friend Gus early in Book I. The interaction between Bigger and Max is described in terms of electricity. After this conversation, Bigger even contemplates a different set of relationships between white people and black people. "For the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of" (Wright 2000: 390). The relationship between Bigger and Max develops and exceeds Bigger's relationship to Jan. James Smethurst suggests that *Native Son* is an anti-gothic because of the interaction between Bigger and Max, which enables Bigger to attain "a genuine self-consciousness" (2001: 37). The fact that Max leaves Bigger for the last time incapable of understanding his assertion "what I killed for, I *am*" does not seem to affect the positive description of this relationship between Max and Bigger.

At no point during his life with the Daltons does Bigger contemplate similar feelings toward them or other white people. When he becomes excited about his new job at the Daltons' and his good salary, he does not seem to link this in any way to the kindness or the humanity of the Daltons. Even when he recalls Peggy's observation that the Daltons give millions of dollars to black people, he muses "the old man had given five million dollars to colored people. If a man could give five million dollars away, then millions must be as common to him as nickels" (Wright 2000: 91). Bigger does not recall that Mrs Dalton is the one who is really the biggest contributor. Actually, Bigger never thinks of Mrs Dalton in a positive way. Instead of contemplating the motives of the Daltons, Bigger thinks of their help as a measure of their wealth. More importantly, he hopes that he will learn from the Daltons the secret of making millions, a hope which he puts into use when he writes a kidnap note asking for 10 thousand dollars. The fact that Peggy goes over how nice the Daltons are and how well they have been treating her and how well they have treated the previous chauffeur, Green, and what kind of motives led them to help black people hardly enlists any response from Bigger.

In fact, the Daltons do not only seem to fail to enlist sympathy from Bigger, their presentation in the text in general is negative, and this seems to colour the way in which they are viewed by most critics. Amy E Carreiro, for example, observes that although "the Daltons believe that their desire to improve conditions for African Americans is benevolent, it has harmful repercussion for Bigger", and that often "the social reformers' approaches, like those of Mrs. Dalton, robbed African Americans of their identity and individuality" (1999: 249). Likewise, Sondra Guttman speaks about the

Daltons' participation in the systematic exploitation and destruction of Bigger and his family (2001: 170).¹

Max sums up the relationship between the Daltons and the Thomas family as “that of renter to landlord, customer to merchant, employee to employer”. He explains the charity of the Daltons by guilt. “The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton family got rich. And Mr. Dalton, a decent man, tried to salve his feelings by giving money” (Wright 2000: 420). Even though Bigger thinks of it briefly on very few occasions, the most powerful justification for this negative presentation is, of course, Mr Dalton’s business in real estate. Bigger’s family rent “one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep” from the South Side Real Estate Company, in which the Dalton Real Estate Company owns the controlling stock. Like most other real estate companies, the South Side Real Estate Company exploits black people by charging exuberant rent, and more importantly in the context of race relations, it implements residential segregation on racial grounds. According to what Mr Dalton refers to as an “old custom”, black people are allowed to rent in the South Side only. The opening, rat scene in *Native Son*, which shows the terrible living conditions and the lack of privacy with which Bigger and his family live, is recalled, not only by Max, but also by readers and critics as the most defining aspect of the Daltons’ treatment of black people. Mr Dalton’s answers to Max’s questions that underselling his competitors will be “unethical” and that black people are happier when they are living together are, of course, not convincing. It is true that he has not invented the old “custom” of segregation and that he is not expected to end segregation alone, segregation does not seem a problem to him, and he does not seem to think that it requires a solution.

The image of blindness seems a very fitting one in describing the Daltons. It is actually used in relation to all the members of the Dalton family, and in the case of Mrs Dalton, blindness is literal. The Daltons cannot see that a great part of the money they pay to black schools is, in fact, obtained by exploiting these very people through exuberant rent and bad maintenance of the houses which they rent to black people.² Moreover, the Daltons are presented as incapable of learning from their suffering as they lose their daughter and continue doing the same thing. When Mr Dalton explains that his “heart is not bitter” and adds that what Bigger “has done will not influence [his] relations with the Negro people” and that he “sent a dozen ping-pong

¹ For similar views on the Daltons, see also Mathew Briones (59: 2003) and Valerie Smith (1987: 81).

² We know that most of the Daltons’ money was inherited by Mrs Dalton, and there is no evidence that this part of the money was linked to real estate and exploiting black people.

tables to the South Side Boys' Club" today, Max explains that Mr Dalton is continuing in the same direction (Wright 2000: 324). The fact that Mr Dalton allows Mrs Thomas and her family to stay in the flat which he owns after Bigger has killed his daughter does not change the image of the Daltons.

Of course, residential segregation is not the only form of racial segregation. If the Daltons do not oppose residential segregation, their treatment of Bigger, and probably Green before him, subverts almost all other codes of racial segregation as they treat Bigger as a chauffeur regardless of his race. Indeed, the only obvious consideration to race is giving the job to Bigger, which Mr Dalton honestly means as giving a chance a young black man. Carreiro suggests that "Mr Dalton exemplifies the Negrotarian's need for affirmation of his 'good deed.' He boasts to Bigger: 'I want you to know why I'm hiring you. You see Bigger, I'm a supporter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People'" (Wright 2000: 250). I think that this statement can be read as an encouragement and a warning to Bigger, who is introduced to Mr Dalton as a sort of problem boy. Mr Dalton's move to grant a job to a black youth with a criminal history is certainly a brave step when read in context. It is important to add that when Mr Dalton asks Bigger about the rent which Bigger's family pays, he offers Bigger a salary which Bigger and his family, at least, think of as very good.

Having stated the objective reasons behind the negative presentation of the Daltons which are their real estate business and their attitude towards segregation, I would like to add that there are many other factors behind the negative presentation of the Daltons and their daughter which are not based on the Daltons themselves. First of all, Richard Wright wrote *Native Son* with a special focus, which he had already explained in his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1994), three years before the publication of *Native Son*. In this essay, Wright describes Negro writing in the past as being generally confined to

humble novels, poems, and plays, decorous ambassadors who go a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. These were received as poodle dogs who have learned clever tricks. (1994: 97)

Wright goes on to complain that "Negro writing on the whole has been the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America. Rarely has the best of this writing been addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, and aspirations" (1994: 97). It is obvious then that Wright is not preoccupied with proving the humanity of Bigger to white Americans as much as with

presenting a true picture of him. He is addressing his writing to the Negroes themselves and their “sufferings and aspirations”. Cynthia Tolentino suggests that instead of “viewing the moral reform of white Americans as the primary weapon in the fight against racial bigotry, Wright turns attention to the development of political consciousness and agency in black Americans” (2000: 388-9). She also refers to the rejection of liberals and the elevation and communists in *Native Son* (2000: 395-6). Carreiro explains that as “a Book-of-the-Month-Club’s selection and best seller, the novel reached a large audience which provided Wright an opportunity to express his dissatisfaction with the oppressing and dominating role of the white reformers, including the CPUSA, in the struggle for racial equality” (1999: 247). The fact that Wright was writing social protest literature explains how Wright responded to a member of the Book-of-the-Month selection committee Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who urged Wright indirectly to say something good about those white Americans who “have done all they could to lighten the dark stain of racial discrimination in our nation”. Wright could not bring himself to express gratitude to white Americans (Rowley 1999: 632).

Wright does not, however, present white America in the same way as Carreiro suggests, for it is obvious that the Daltons are rejected as liberals while Jan and Max are elevated as communists.³ Accordingly, the Daltons are judged by the antagonistic view of the defence, which contributes to the negative presentation of the Daltons. It is very important, therefore, to look at the members of the Dalton family beyond the dominant view of the defence and the way they are presented through Bigger’s almost controlling perspective. Of course, Mr Dalton’s contribution to black education is not limited to ping-pong tables, as Max suggests. We know that he has donated five millions to black schools. How these schools receive these millions is only referred to. Mr Dalton’s communication with black schools is not described. It is, of course, wrong to suggest that all black students are like Bigger: not interested in education, and incapable of appreciating support for education.⁴ This leaves the door open for another way of viewing the Daltons’

³ Despite this elevation of Jan and Max, communists were not quite satisfied with the way they are presented in the book. For more on their response to *Native Son*, see Briones (2003: 56-9).

⁴ Critics do not agree on the wider issue of Bigger’s representation of urban black people’s collective psyche. James Baldwin, for example, argues in his study of Bigger Thomas that “a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life” (1995: 35). On the other hand, Aimé J. Ellis suggests that Bigger is representative of those black males Angie Stone refers to as “your down for whatever chilling’ on the corner, brotha”, brothers

contribution to black education even if that way is not described.⁵ Mr Dalton's help for black people, which does not provoke racist people directly and does not jeopardize his relationship to the white community, goes against the spirit of *Native Son*, which focuses more on black agency. But even here, the response of the white community at large towards Mr Dalton's help for black people is omitted. Certainly, there are people who are not happy with it. At least Britten makes it clear that black people do not deserve help. When Mr Dalton explains to Britten that he wanted to give Bigger a chance, Britten tells Mr Dalton: they "don't need a chance, if you ask me. They get in enough trouble without it" (Wright 2000: 193).

If the Daltons' contribution to black education does not set them apart from the rest of the white world, which is associated here with racism, then their attitude towards Bigger, especially after they find out that he has killed their daughter, certainly does. Critics often study the occasion of the Daltons' first reception of Bigger and their use of sociological terms to point out that Bigger is dealt with as an experiment. But the response of the Daltons towards Bigger after the disappearance of their daughter and after they find out that it was Bigger who has killed their daughter is hardly examined. The Daltons never rush to accuse Bigger, as Britten does, for example. Mr Dalton defends Bigger against Britten's accusations and accepts his version of the story, which contradicts the story of Jan. There is no evidence at all to suggest that Mr and Mrs Dalton believe in the myth of the black rapist, neither before the killing of their daughter nor after. If they believed the myth, they would not have hired black chauffeurs in the first place.

Addressing *Native Son* to Negroes and their suffering and aspiration by confining it to the perspective of Bigger results in neglecting the suffering and the grief of white liberals. While Bigger's trial is made the subject of Book III, and his family and friends are given a chance to visit him and show their grief for his very likely death sentence, the Daltons' grief for their daughter is largely absent. When the Daltons are desperately looking for their daughter, the focus is on Bigger and how he tries to hide his crime or even plans another one. When Mary is killed, her suffering and pain is largely omitted because she is described as drunk. All we are told about is the response of her body to Bigger's attempt to smother her. The gruesome

who are "facin' doubt" and desperately trying to "work it out" (2006: 183).

⁵ The presentation of the Daltons' contributions to black education is similar to the presentation of Joana Burden's support to black education in William Faulkner's *Light in August* and to that of Linda Kohl Snopes in Faulkner's other work, *The Mansion*. The activism of both women is presented from the perspective of men who think of it as madness. By contrast, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* shows more appreciation of the activism of the Bodwins, a family of white liberals and former abolitionists.

details of burning Mary's body and beheading her also eliminate her suffering as she is dead and the focus is on Bigger and his fear. When the Daltons find out that their daughter is missing and when they think that she is kidnapped, we only catch glimpses of their pain and suffering through the eavesdropping of Bigger, who is collecting information to hide his act and plan for exploiting the Daltons. Bigger never sympathizes with the Daltons, and as readers are persuaded by the perspective of Bigger to focus on Bigger's fears and plans, the readers' sympathy with the Daltons is compromised significantly. Mary is not given a funeral in the text, and all we see of mourning her is the tears of her mother and grandmother in court. The Daltons' grief is compromised further because it is conveyed to the reader, not through her grieving parents, but through the hateful speeches of racist people including the state attorney Mr Buckley and the coroner and through the writings of numerous racist journalists whose articles are read by Bigger. These speeches and writings do not sympathize with Mary and her parents as much as they seize the opportunity to express racist views and use Bigger's acts as evidence. The following paragraph from Mr Buckley's speech in court illustrates this.

While the family was searching heaven and earth for their daughter, this ghoul writes a kidnap note demanding ten thousand dollars for the *safe return* of Miss Dalton! But the discovery of the bones in the furnace put that foul dream to an end! (Wright 2000: 437)

Even though everything about the Daltons is true here, the use of the word "ghoul" foregrounds racism at the expense of the Daltons' pain. Readers, who are repulsed by the loud racism are very likely to reject the Daltons and their grief because Buckley's racist voice declares that it is on the side of the Daltons.

Mary is not to blame for the exploitation of black people by people like her father or for residential segregation. Even though she is brought up as a white liberal and she develops an interest in black people because of her parents' interest in black education, Mary's activism is shaped mainly by her sympathy with the Communist Party. In contrast to her father's pacifistic approach to helping black people, Mary is a revolutionary. Robert Butler suggests that Mary's radical behaviour includes "running away to New York and taking off with Jan and entering a circle of radicals" (1986: 13). I think that Mary's attitude towards segregation and the way she talks to and touches Bigger would seem even more radical to racist whites. On the way to the South Side with Bigger and Jan, she complains "I've been to England, France and Mexico, but I don't know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people.

Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home” (Wright 2000: 101).⁶ Tolentino finds in Mary’s desire to “see” and “know” a depiction of “the inadequacy of liberal attempts to produce racial knowledge”. She suggests that the novel “shows how liberal attempts to engage with blacks are encoded by the language and the tropes of cultural anthropology and sociology most commonly associated with Mary Dalton’s school, the University of Chicago” (2000: 393). Carreiro reads this curiosity as a sign of white liberals’ ignorance and naivety and suggests that Mary’s commitment to racial relations simplifies African American culture. “Mary believes that by experiencing Bigger’s culture and sharing a barbecue with him she will understand the plight of African Americans” (1999: 250). On the other hand, James Fairfield argues that whereas “Bigger clearly exhibits discomfort in the white realm of Mr. Dalton’s study, Mary and Jan have no problems putting themselves at ease within the confines of Ernie’s Kitchen Shack... Mary and Jan can cross over, at least temporarily, into multiple linguistic communities, whereas Bigger remains trapped in his own” (2007: 75). Even though Bigger misreads Mary’s curiosity, and her desire to know more about black people proves inadequate in approaching Bigger, Mary’s intentions are good. Moreover, Mary’s activism would be inadequate if it is limited to curiosity only. When Jan proposes that she works with him in “the office”, Mary refuses and explains that her approach to helping black people is more direct: “I want to work among Negroes. That’s where people are needed. It seems as though they’ve been pushed out of everything” (Wright 2000: 108). This demonstrates that Mary’s interest in black people is even stronger than that of Jan.

In all her interaction with Bigger, Mary never shows that she regards black people as inferior. When Bigger reflects on their first meeting, he observes she was “an odd girl, all right. He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspired in him. She responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she. And he had never felt that before in a white person” (Wright 2000: 96). It is quite ironic that Bigger describes Mary as odd exactly because she is behaving naturally towards him. Bigger, obviously, defines the natural in relation to white people as synonymous with what he has been conditioned to regard as natural. Mary would have looked natural to him if she had behaved in a racist way like Britten, for example.

Mary has the potential to understand Bigger as much as Jan does, but she is killed “too soon”. She appears in the novel only for one evening. In her

⁶ Becca Gercken links the ability to see to agency in *Native Son*. As he argues, “The individual who owns the gaze occupies the dominant or “male” position and has agency, a power and authority often constructed as the ability to desire” (2011: 634).

approach to Bigger, Mary risks more than Jan, as a declared male member of the Communist Party, does. In contrast to Bessie Mears, who represents the easily accessible symbol of black women, Mary represents the symbol of the desirable but inaccessible white world, and white women in particular.⁷ This status of Mary as a symbol of white economic and social power has been observed by numerous critics. Guttman observes that the “newsreel viewed by Bigger and his friend Jack represents Mary as both an object of sexual desire and a symbol of white, capitalist power” (2001: 172). Katherine Fishburn suggests that “Bigger feels as free and powerful as he does following Mary’s murder because he has violated white society’s most potent taboo” (1999: 213).⁸ Mary subverts racial segregation and racial codes because she rejects this status of a symbol. Tolentino rightly observes that “Mary rejects the role of an irreducible marker of race” (2000: 386). Mary does not only reject the role of a white lady which is assigned to her, rather she acts against it. This is clearly demonstrated in the way Mary talks to Bigger, and the way she interacts with him physically. While Mrs Dalton is reluctant to discuss Mary’s drunkenness with her husband in the presence of Bigger, Mary does not have a problem in being driven while drunk by Bigger, sitting in the front seat when they are alone in the car, touching Bigger or being carried by him into her bedroom.

There also is the possibility that Mary might be ready to have a sexual relationship with her black chauffeur. No doubt, this would be the ultimate subversion of racial codes. It is Bigger’s certainty that his presence in Mary’s bedroom will be interpreted as rape by white people that compels him to kill Mary. However, it is very difficult to be categorical about Mary’s attitude towards sex with Bigger as she is drunk when he approaches her sexually. The aborted sexual encounter between Mary and Bigger has been viewed in contradictory ways by critics. Hazel Rowley, for example, suggests that Mary uses her drunkenness as a pretext for having sex with Bigger (1999: 631), and that she “desired her black chauffeur every bit as much as he desired her—if not more so” (1999: 629). Guttman, on the other hand, suggests that Bigger “takes advantage of Mary’s state of near-unconsciousness by manipulating her body so that it seems as if she is actively responding to him” (2001: 178). While the text presents enough evidence that Mary has been drinking, it does not tell how drunk Mary is, and to what extent she is interested in having a

⁷ For more on the opposite status of white and black women see Hortense J. Spillers’s essay: “Mama’s Baby, Baba’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.”

⁸ Elizabeth Shultz, who compares *Native Son* to *Moby Dick*, suggests that Mary represents to Bigger what the white whale represents to Ahab. “For Ahab, the agent or principal of that universe is *Moby Dick*, the White Whale; for Bigger, the agent is Mary Dalton ... the principal is white society itself” (1999: 642).

sexual relationship with Bigger and using her drunkenness as a pretext. Moreover, the encounter is described from Bigger's point of view, and as usual Mary's point of view is not available to us. If the Daltons are not criticised by racists for their contribution to black education, then they will be definitely criticized for their daughter's activism if she goes to work among black people, or if she is rumoured to have a sexual relationship with Bigger. Mary's interest in black people will be definitely branded as "loving Negros.". We do not know whether racist people reconstruct Mary's relationship to Bigger in any other way beside the official version of rape and murder.

If Mary's parents are rejected because they condone segregation and because their approach to race relations is pacifistic, then Mary presents an alternative radical activism, which is in line with Wright's focus. Indeed, developing the relationship between Mary and Bigger can be accommodated within the elevation of the communists. Why Wright does not develop the potential of Mary as he does with Jan and Max is a very interesting point. Guttman explains Mary's death "as a result of her refusal to be the disembodied symbol of white wealth and power. Wright means to show—but not to condone—the dire consequences for white woman of displaying sexual and (therefore) political desire" (2001: 180). I think that if a relationship is allowed to take place between Mary and Bigger or if she is permitted to work among Negros, then the agency would be wholly attributed to Mary. Even though Bigger would be seen as violating the ultimate taboo, and eating what Sherley Anne Williams calls the "American fruit forbidden the black man", the agency would not be his (1995: 66).

Richard Wright became gradually disillusioned with the CPUSA and he left it formally in 1942. In his biography of Richard Wright, Michel Fabre mentions that when Wright's friend Horace Cayton disclosed that "the Communists would withhold their support from any attempt to combat government discrimination, Wright withdrew from the Party without a scandal" (1973: 229). Fabre cites, as a proof of Wright's break with the Party, a letter which Wright sent to Edward Aswell in 1955. In this letter Wright states: "I had intuitively realized much of what is now in the daily press about the Communist Party, including its infiltration by the FBI, agents, etc. ... when I discovered that I was holding a tainted instrument in my hands, I dropped that instrument". Wright also speaks in this letter about other things which bothered him. Those things "stemmed from the ramifications of the racial question in the United States" (Fabre 1973: 230). In his study of Wright's ideological shifts, Mathew Briones refers to Wright's criticism of the Party's theory that "a communist must be portrayed as a hero all the time, disallowing any complexity, if not contradiction, in characters" (2003: 58).

In other words, Wright was dissatisfied with the Communist Party for artistic reasons, too.

If the focus of Wright's writing on Negroes' agency and consciousness continued after the writing of *Native Son*, his elevation of the communists did not. "The ramifications of the racial question" in America, which motivated Wright's break with the Party, are similar to the ramifications which prompted his rejection of white liberals in *Native Son*. Wright's break with the Communist Party raises the question whether the communists Max and Jan would have received the same elevation had Wright's break with the CPUSA come before writing *Native Son*. It is very likely that Wright's disillusionment with both white liberals and communists would have led him to extend black agency beyond Bigger's "liberating" crimes. A greater role for the black community in *Native Son* well beyond Rev Hammond's prayers, would have probably figured out as one of the consequences of the focus on Negroes. Another major consequence of this focus would have probably been a more balanced presentation of white activism, with less distinction between communism and white liberalism. Finally, Mary Dalton's "untimely" killing could have given way to developing the potential of her activism and her sexual/ political desires.

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