The Prison Chronotope in Richard Wright's Native Son

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Abstract: *With a starting point in the persistent presence of imprisonment in African American life, this article revisits Richard Wright's iconic novel Native Son (1940), to show how it can con- tribute to the critical conversation around incarceration today. Notwithstanding the horrific thematic of the novel, and despite suggestions of writers such as James Baldwin and Addison Gayle Jr. that it does little more than mirror horror, the article argues that the way in which the novel brings layers of imprisonment into view contributes to recognizing the challenges to individual as well as collective agency in the light of perennial racial incarcer- ation.*

Keywords *Richard Wright, Native Son, imprisonment, protest novel, critique*

The prison has forever formed a devastating presence in African American life and literature. The mass incarceration of today—which Michelle Alexander identifies as the "New Jim Crow"—is differently configured from, but ultimately a continuation of, the carceral practices of the original Jim Crow period and of the slavery era.[1] Thus, slavery's "underlying philosophy of punishment," as Angela Davis famously notes, has "insinuated itself into the history of imprisonment."[2] Radical disparities between white and Black incarceration rates remain to this day, as does the statistical likelihood that Black men, in particular, will spend some of their lives in prison.[3] The presence of the prison in the lives of Black men is thus a very real and concrete one. At the same time, imprisonment also serves as a materialized metaphor in social and literary writing to account for racial oppression and segregation in society at large. Here it denotes an equally real sense of confinement that makes it difficult to move beyond racialized borders,

boundaries, precincts: Slavery is a "prison-house," wrote Frederick Douglass in 1845,[4] and more than a century later, Malcolm X states that "You're still in prison. That's what America means: prison."[5] Confirming the continuing relevance of such perennial experiences of confinement to a twenty-first century present, Alexander argues that today, ex-convicts remain incarcerated indefinitely in that they are forever excluded from essential societal practices and rights such as voting, employment, and housing and thus remain excluded from mainstream society and economy; they are expelled into a "second-class citizenship."[6] In addi- tion to the actual prison and the materialized metaphor of imprison- ment, a third and interrelated signification of confinement is voiced by James Baldwin in his renowned critique of protest novels, in which he insists that such novels emerge as "a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream."[7] Here, the prison denotes instead the false hope generated by the American ideal of freedom, a pinioning of potential precisely through the deceptive pull of possibility. This essay homes in on the dynamics between these three dimensions of imprisonment— concrete prison walls, racialized boundaries, and a captivity in national fantasies that do not correspond to (African American) reality—in an attempt to give the figurative and formal functions of such historically evolving carceral practices some more of the attention they deserve.

The essay analyzes how these three dimensions of imprisonment are stacked one upon another and speak to each other in one of the most famous protests novels of all: Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). With this novel, and, centrally, through its protagonist Bigger Thomas, Wright wants to portray the repeated "behavioristic pattern" of numerous young Black men during the Jim Crow era whose anger and frustration make them inescapably callous and cruel. It is precisely the recurrence of impotent violence rather than any individual uniqueness that he wishes to emphasize: "If I had known only one Bigger I would not have written *Native Son*."[8] And it is precisely the becoming mean, rather than being such innately or organically, that he wants to illu- minate through an emphasis on "the nature of the environment that produced these men."[9] Much to the dismay of many contemporary as well as subsequent readers, the depravity of Wright's protagonist is inexorably accentuated throughout the novel: after an initial sense of hopelessness and confinement in the "Black Belt"—a poor segre- gated, overcrowded, and derelict part of Chicago at this time—Bigger gets a job as a driver for a rich white family in the suburbs. Rather than nurturing this opening, he murders the daughter of the family and decapitates and burns her body in the family's furnace. He then moves on to rape and murder his own girlfriend, Bessie, disposing of her body by throwing it down an airshaft. Shamelessly returning to the white family, he pretends to help with the investigation and attempts to cast the blame on the daughter's communist boyfriend, a man who has tried to befriend him. Eventually exposed, Bigger escapes across Chicago, and after an extended chase he is put in prison and sentenced to death.

Constituting a key reference point, not only for the modern African American novel as such but also for debates on critique in this field, *Native Son*'s contribution to critical literary and political debate is unsur- prisingly too vast to account for. The novel has gained immense atten-tion and borne the weight of the numerous readings, analyses, discus- sions, criticism, and praise that comes with its status. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," first published 1949, Baldwin tries to settle accounts with the kind of protest novel that accentuates and confirms the evils of slavery and racism without representing the complexity and ambi- guity of life also under such circumstances. Such novels, he argues, recourse only to a "catalogue of brutality" and thus fail to convey some- thing of life's beauty and power.[10] Alongside Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Baldwin picks Wright's *Native Son* as a prime example of such failed protest novels and thereby commits what has sometimes been seen as a patricide on Wright, who was a key figure for many young African American writers at the time. For the Black Arts Movement in the 1960, conversely, the merciless naturalism the novel represents was central, as thematic lenience and formal experi- mentation were seen as concessions to a white middle-class audience. As Houston A. Baker noted in the early 1970s—that is, thirty years after the book's publication—Bigger's hope that he "could be an idea in their minds; that his Black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy" has been fulfilled.[11] Another half a century down the line, we can only confirm that the image of the atrocious Bigger Thomas remains.

The motif of imprisonment is easily discerned in the novel. It constitutes, as Isabel Soto puts it, "a major structural and organizing principle" that is interlinked with the novel's racial dynamics—space as recurrently filtered through the motif of entrapment.[12] A close inter- rogation of the figuration of imprisonment in *Native Son* brings into view how the novel not only portrays the vicious cycles of oppres- sion that produce callous young Black men but that it also, ultimately, opens toward their espousal of a more productive critical perspective on a society that has constricted them in so many ways. Thereby, I will show, Wright's configuration of imprisonment offers a more complex literary critique than that for which Baldwin gives him credit. Although Wright's novel indubitably offers little by way of hope, and although it may certainly be seen as a "bitter railing" against the compact entrap- ment of categorization,[13] analyzing the layering of figures of impris- onment in novel, as well as a number of disorientations pushing Bigger from one dimension of imprisonment to another, makes it possible to once again reopen Baldwin's argument, the contemporary debates around the novel, and the vital relations between literature and critique that they inspired. Wright's novel, I will argue, deploys literary strategies, not only to bring this bitterness into view, but also to envision the critical potential of the bringing-into-view itself. My reading thereby takes a different tack than that of the many readings that emphasize

the novel's preoccupation with blindness.[14] The hope is that this bringing-into-view may be of further use, not only in literary analyses of what Tara T. Green calls "African-American confinement literature" in general[15] but also to a broader cultural analytical context. In the twenty-first century, Alexander notes, "people who have been incarcerated rarely have difficulties identifying parallels between […] systems of control"[16] that not only "lock[] people behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls—walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively as Jim Crow laws once did."[17] For those who have not had to recognize these systems the hard way, I hope to show how the interlinking of three dimensions of racialized imprisonment in Wright's *Native Son* ultimately offers up a critical perspective that may be helpful to the further analyses of the links between the different spatiotemporal configurations of mass incarceration and their implications on notions of freedom and agency today. The argument will track these figura- tions through the three sections of the novel: Fear, Flight, Fate.

FEAR—THE PENITENTIARY OF SEGREGATION

As the alarm bell rings—a "tinny ring of metal"—on the first page of *Native Son*, it colludes with the morning light to wake and reveal "a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds."[18] As he holds on to the bars of his prison cell in the final lines of the novel, the ringing of steel echoes as the door shuts behind the Black boy's lawyer and, effectively, his life.[19] Many have noted the eerie metallic reverber- ations that open and close the novel; how "The premonitory imprison- ment of Bigger, trapped between iron in a cramped kitchenette, imag- istically survives to re-appear at the very end, with Bigger facing death and being literally contained by iron bars in a prison cell."[20] Wright himself states that he wanted the novel to end as it begun, with Bigger "taking his life in his own hands, accepting what life had made him."[21] I would argue, however, that such correspondence overplays Bigger's agency at the first point at the same time as it downplays the effect of his arrival at the latter. As Bigger passes through numerous narrow spaces from the first to the last ring of metal, the novel's systematic and structural processing of the three dimensions of imprisonment ultimately transforms the "violence which is just under the skin," as Frantz Fanon famously puts it, and which constitutes the "only work" of a colonized people,[22] into an outward-looking, critical vision.

The cramped and rat-infested room in which Bigger and his family live, the noisy street with its delimited options and opportunities, and the missing cents even to take a streetcar to a potential job in the lush and affluent suburbs effectively portrays the claustrophobic atmo- sphere of life in downtown Depression-Era Chicago. Historically, the Great Migration of the first half of the century and the extreme discrim- ination and segregation of the city had

conspired to make the Black Belt of Chicago into one of the most completely segregated spaces anywhere, ever. Most Black citizens lived in a severely overcrowded area that held over 90 percent Blacks and at this time, the borders of this "Belt" seemed to consolidate around them.[23] "I reckon," as Bigger puts it as he jealously eyes a pigeon taking flight, "we the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go and do what we want to do."[24] This imprisonment in the Black Belt echoes throughout the novel in concrete dichotomous imagery—"We live here and they live there. We Black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence…"[25] It is also repeatedly compared to animal cages—Bigger and his friends are kept "bottled up here like wild animals,"[26] and in a fancy white people's home, they imagine Bigger being identified as "a gorilla broke loose from the zoo."[27] This comparison is also activated in the exoticizing eagerness of the novel's white radical characters to venture into "one of those places where colored people eat" and into their houses to "just *see* how your people live."[28]

"Are human beings free or are they not? Ought they to be free or ought they not to be free? The history of Afro-American litera- ture," notes Davis, "furnishes an illuminating account of the nature of freedom, its extents and limits."[29] This is a perspective on freedom that exposes the limitations of Western philosophical discourses by conveying the consciousness of those who have had no access to "the real world of freedom."[30] In the unfinished lecture in which she intended to trace literary conceptions and negotiations of freedom from the slavery era to her own late twentieth century present, Davis does not get further than to Douglass. His journey to knowledge, through alienation to physical and mental rejection to resistance beyond indi-vidual alienation was, of course, shaped by the very specific condi- tions of slavery.[31] Wright's intervention is shaped rather by the extents and limits of freedom in the extreme segregation of the modern city, which allows us to continue asking the existential questions that Davis reiterates: "should freedom be conceived as an inherent characteristic of the human mind, whose expression is primarily inward? Or is it a goal to be realized through human action in the real, objective world? Freedom of thought? Freedom of action? Freedom as practical realiza- tion?"[32]

Central to historical liberal discourses on freedom is freedom as freedom of movement. Alongside the emergence of liberalism, Hagar Kotef notes, a pre-modern discipline configured as "the denial of free movement" develops into an "ordered freedom" that relies on subjects' "willingness to control and confine [their own] movements."[33] Thomas Hobbes, for example, asserted that liberty is, as Kotef puts it, "merely a particular relation between the body's natural ability to move and the available possibilities to actualize it."[34] This does not necessarily reduce the deployment of restricted

movement—indeed, quite the contrary, and as Michel Foucault has showed in some detail, freedom of movement is possible only "within a system of enclosures"[35]—but as with so many of the privileges associated with the liberal individual, freedom of movement was, and still is, effectively delimited to certain kinds of bodies.[36]

In an American context, this liberal freedom as freedom of move- ment has constituted a national ideal from the very beginning, as suggested for example via the prominent cultural trope of being "on the road." The account of the Black Belt in *Native Son* exposes the nature and extent of such American "freedom" in an African American spacetime that is markedly and forcibly demarcated, in which move- ment is severely restricted and time is something that just needs to pass without any sense of a goal or direction. In other words, both space and time offer restricted possibilities to move and to act. Not only is Bigger caught in a racialized spacetime, he also—and in line with genre expectations of the protest novel—allegorically represents the link between confinement and an undermining of freedom and agency among urbanized African Americans more broadly. Bigger's position thereby brings out the consciousness and struggles of a man who has, to paraphrase Davis, continually been denied entry to a world of freedom; it exposes the inadequacies of the practice of freedom, as well as liberal formulations thereof, in a mid-twentieth century racial- ized context.

A phenomenological conception of orientation helps illuminate exactly how this position of being banned from the practice of freedom emerges through the figure of the prison. Orientations, Sara Ahmed notes, shape our ways of inhabiting space and apprehending shared space—they shape what and who we focus our attention and energy on.[37] Our orientation—how our bodies inhabit space and time and how they become oriented by them—renders some objects and aspira- tions invisible and thereby inaccessible; they remain beyond the clear trodden path. This clear trodden path, conversely, stakes out what obviously lies before us, which come to appear as normal and maybe even inevitable. As Davis puts it, "the vicious circle linking poverty, police courts, and prison is an integral element of ghetto existence," which means that "the path which leads to jails and prisons is deeply rooted in the imposed patterns of Black existence."[38] In Wright's novel, the invisibility and inaccessibility of objects and aspirations beyond the clear-because-imposed trodden path of the Black Belt is experi- enced as such both from the outside and the inside. From the outside it constitutes a space white people do not want to see or, at their most radical, may want to briefly visit. From within, its imprisonment goes all the way to the skin, shaping body and agency alike. Indeed, Bigger has "been so conditioned in a cramped environment" that it is only "hard words or kicks" that can "knock[…] him upright and [make] him capable of action."[39] Agency, insofar as it can be called that, emerges not in terms of a conscious decision or sensible choice but as a result of an aggression or assault—as reaching and affecting the body from the outside.[40]

Bigger's negotiations of space and time emerge, not only by means of delimitations from the outside, but also by invading his inside: The white folks do not live "Over across the 'line'" but "Right down here in my stomach," and as one of his friends adds, "in your chest and throat too."[41] If the transition from pre-modern modes of discipline based on control of physical movement to the internalization of spatial control enabling liberalism relied on producing a liberal subject that harbors control within itself, as we have seen, Bigger's containment in space also cages him from within and thus precludes him from forming such a subject position. With white folk in his stomach, chest, and throat, where would the space be for a liberal subject controlling its own freedom and containing it within itself?

Bigger's potential agency balances on this "line"—on the external demarcation between the white city and the Black and between the internal, virtually nonexistent, distinction between himself and his internalized oppression and hatred. It balances between his sense that "something awful's going to happen to me"[42]—an externally provoked event—and the internalization of an act that too seems to foreclose conscious intentionality: "like I was going to do something I can't help."[43] It is the negotiation of this fence, border, limit, skin on the one hand and this knot-hole, tiny opening, small gash on the other that makes Bigger feel, however briefly, that he can shape his own fate. The tragedy of this perversion—that it takes rape and murder for him to recover a sense of agency—seems to confirm Fanon's insistence on violence as an indispensable route to action. It is, Baldwin underscores, monstrous and appalling: at this point, Bigger seems to have accepted the criteria and categories that "den[y] him life."[44]

We may, however, uncover an operative dimension beyond violence if we note how the novel constructs this perverted knothole, this tiny opening or small gash in Bigger's imprisonment within racial- ized borders, as an in-between space that opens for disorientation. In phenomenological terms, disorientation emerges when our mechan- ical extension into space fails. Through such failures we become aware of our orientation—we catch sight of what has guided us so far— of "where we are and where we are going, how we begin, how our "here" affects what we see as "there" up to this point.[45] In the following section, I will show how this tipping point leads from the prison of segregation to the prison of false hope.

FLIGHT—THE SUNLIT CONFINEMENT

The killing of Mary Dalton—the defiant daughter of Bigger's wealthy white employer—takes the shape of a distinctly racialized spatio- temporal configuration. Bigger has carried a very drunk Mary to her bed painfully aware that a Black man caught in a white woman's bedroom would be in deep trouble. So when he is cornered in this room by Mary's blind mother entering and approaching Mary's bed, he presses downs a cushion on Mary's face to

keep her quiet. As he realizes that Mary has perished beneath the cushion, he matches the mother's movements in reverse—as she approaches, he retreats from the bed—and thereby escapes discovery.[46] A few moments later, space and time turn inside out: "reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place." At the same time, he accepts the racialized expectations of who he is: "He was a murderer, a Negro Murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman."[47]

This affirmation constitutes not only a singular, individual crisis but a historical and racialized one: It actualizes a virtual position that Bigger as a Black man has always already been expected to embody. He is "bound" as Baldwin puts it in more general terms, "first without, then within, by the nature of [his] categorization," a categorization bequeathed him at birth. His is clearly a failed escape, one that serves precisely to spring this ready-made trap upon him.[48] Bigger becoming a Negro murderer of a white woman, in other words, does not find its rationality in individual agency so much as in already established spatiotemporal conditions that predetermine his fate. But while this does appear as fate for him as a racialized character, thus completely divesting him of individual agency, the novel itself deploys this tipping point to activate the larger structural problematic that also harbors the seed of his own critical consciousness. Precisely because it emerges from disorientation, precisely because it cannot be ascribed a clear position within a clearly specified temporality, the novel combines what Baldwin recognizes as the "brutal criteria bequeathed [Bigger] at his birth"[49] with a structuralist critique.

Bigger's disorientation materializes as a tipping point not only between the inside and outside of his body but also between two reali- ties. Back in his room after the killing, he looks at the room and out the window "but his mind formed no image of any of these. They simply existed, unrelated to each other." Bigger is momentarily suspended in an in-between space, cast under a spell, "a spell that waited for the wand of fear to touch it and endow it with reality and meaning."[50] Mikko Tuhkanen reads this as psychosis: an unsettling of the grounds, a disruption of the sense of continuity of the body in space, a loss of potentiality.[51] I would argue, however, that the actualization of the role he was always expected to take generates his most defined agential movement so far. Beginning to plot his escape, Bigger realizes that what might save him is not an innovative approach but a twist of what is already there; a conscious activation of, rather than a subconscious resistance to, the position into which he is already inscribed. He needs to act, in other words, in accordance with other people's expectations.[52] In reality, Bigger may have been "born a slave in a captive society and never experience[ed] any objective basis for expectation," as George Jackson put it in one of his own letters from prison a few decades later, and as such, arrived at the seemingly inevitable route to "progres- sively traumatic misfortunes."[53] At the same

time, however, the lack of direction characterizing his life up to this point has been eased and he feels that things are finally becoming clear, that he can do anything: that "he would know how to act from now on."[54]

Tuhkanen compares Bigger's strategy with Lacan's conception of mimicry—adapting to a determining gaze but also, when the role ascribed to you is claimed and further exaggerated, reclaiming the space that otherwise threatens to erase you as a subject. For Lacan, becoming a subject depends, of course, on entry into the symbolic and thus on an alienation of the subject that will always also look at itself from the outside. This generates a paranoia that is structurally requi- site to the formation of the human subject. Lacan's connection between paranoia and subjectivity can be fruitfully aligned with African American double consciousness, as Tuhkanen suggests, and also with how, if correctly balanced, it can constitute an attempt at healing and at effecting counterstrategies against oppression. The truth is hidden at the surface, as in Lacan's double deception, and it can be negotiated via mimicry or, as in Tuhkanen's specific example, via "black(face) magic."[55] The mimicking of Mrs. Dalton's movements in Mary's room, he notes, constitutes an anticipatory and embodied instantiation of this strategy. Bigger negotiates his disorientation by deploying "the curtain in a masterful game of paranoid knowledge."[56] As Bigger himself puts it: "The thing to do was to act just like others acted, live like they lived, and while they were not looking, do what you wanted. They would never know." (136). Bigger, in other words, plays along with the expec- tations that surround him—the investigators are at first eager to trace the murder back to a communist plot—and he thus makes himself invisible by hiding, like Poe's purloined letter, in broad daylight.

When suspicion ultimately falls on him anyway, Bigger takes the opposite tack and decides, instead, to claim and affirm his role as a "Negro murderer." Like Jackson on the inexorable route to traumatic misfortunes, he now perceives this act as the inevitable outcome of his life. His crime constitutes but an actualization of the many virtual killings he felt he had already committed inside himself. This was simply the first time there was a "handy victim of circumstance to make visible or dramatic his will to kill." In murdering a white woman, "The hidden meaning of his life—a meaning with others did not see and which he had always tried to hide—had spilled out."[57] This "spilling out" is significant. What "spills out," it seems, is his internal oppression: The white people that have lived in his stomach, chest, and throat are evacuated from his body, vomited up, materialized. His earlier sense that something was going to happen to him or that he was going to do something he could not help has been transformed into something more agential; he felt a "deep debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed,"[58] as it has awakened in him "a latent capacity to live."[59] Violence, in other words, seems to constitute a "cleansing force," as Fanon notoriously suggests it does for colonized people, freeing him "from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction," making him "fearless" and restoring "his

self-respect."[60] As Bryan J. McCann notes, this is one of the most provocative moves of the novel—to infuse Bigger's horrifying violence with "life-giving sustenance."[61]

I would like to suggest, however, that it is not the violence itself but the phenomenological disorientation that follows that provides this sustenance. When the wand of fear is waved and initiates his flight into the city, Bigger gets the opportunity to more consciously connect his inner negotiations with external, spatiotemporal, navigation. As his existential and spatiotemporal imprisonment in the Black Belt tips over into a negotiation of the city as a whole, his crime offers a spatiotem- poral shield against the larger world: It becomes "a barrier of protec- tion between him and a world he feared" and "an anchor weighing him safely in time." For a moment, the disorientation of breaking through the borders of segregation seems to generate the agency that comes with freedom of movement, an illusion that he is a liberal subject, that he is in a position to realize his body's "natural ability to move and the available possibilities to actualize it," as we have seen Kotef put it. This illusion provides an anchor that yields more confidence than any weapon would.[62] He no longer has to "hide behind a wall or a curtain" but has "a safer way of being safe, an easier way."[63] The prison has become one with his body. As he becomes "productively out of step with the time of his life-world," Tuhkanen notes how it becomes possible for Bigger to "experiment with speeds that differ from the one according to which his fear-ridden existence has been timed."[64] Much like Fred Daniel's realization that the people above ground could not be awakened, that "they were children, sleeping in their living" in Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1942/2021),[65] Bigger's sensa- tion also has clear spatial implications—it comes from being "outside," "over," and "beyond" his family and their lives—from seeing them from behind "a natural wall."[66] Both his own and white people live, he imagines, in a blindness that comes from affirming "a certain picture of the world," but he is now able to see and to be free.[67] In other words, in dislodging himself from the Black Belt, he has discovered a more mobile way of negotiating a "fear-ridden life" of fences, borders, veils, curtains, "lines."

Just as the killing is felt to be but an actualization of many other killings, Bigger interprets this dislodging as an outer actualization of his inner sense of dislocation: "He had always felt outside of this white world, and now it was true. It made things simple."[68] From now on, he has claimed and taken charge of what has previously been an externally enforced boundary. He has himself affirmed and effected a demarcation that precludes him from sharing reality with the white population of the city. Such divisions also emerge in his sense of rela- tion with others: His "accidental murder" has thrown him "into a posi- tion where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his rela- tions with the people about him."[69] But while his act has dislocated him from his shadowy existence in the Black Belt to the larger city, it remains hard for him to find an

entry into this new reality. The reality he imagines when he thinks and dreams about the city does not match the reality "looked at"[70]—it is "too stark," not made real with "the warm blood of life" it lacks opportunities, roads to new chances.[71] We can now almost see the real but intangible walls that strive to confine him. His negotiations of cramped spaces are recurrently characterized by a spatiotemporalization of his sensations that reflects the fear of incarceration but also a striving toward something else, and with this striving, a budding potential for an expanded sense of agency. Reading the newspaper, going to the cinema, or walking through crowded streets inspire in him a longing "to merge himself with others and be part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself."[72] He is inexorably prohibited such wholeness, however, by a distinc- tion between what he *knows* and what he *feels*, between what the *world*

gives him and what he *himself* has; "something spread out in *front* of him and something spread out in *back*; and never in all his life, with this Black skin of his, had the two worlds, thought and feeling, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together."[73]

Bigger thus experiences a sense of alienation which, as Davis gleans from Douglass's descriptions of his own emerging sense of critical agency, becomes more painful when acknowledged but also constitutes the first incentive to theoretical and practical "thrust in the direction of freedom."[74] Bigger's alienation is described as directly molded by a spatiotemporal reality that does not match his experience of it: "[I]n his room or on the sidewalk, the world seemed to him a strange labyrinth even when the streets were straight and the walls were square; a chaos which made him feel that something in him should be able to understating it, divide it, focus it."[75] The only way to resolve the conflict between his body and the world around him (and this is the essence of the novel's message) is through hard words and kicks; that is, through "the stress of hate."[76]

Ultimately, Tuhkanen notes, the "weight of his historically prede- termined position is such that it tends to destroy his newly gained posi- tion of freedom."[77] Where the first section of the novel, Fear, negotiates imprisonment as a materialized metaphor for segregation, the second section, Flight, brings into view how negotiating this confinement is supplemented by a negotiation of entrapment in the "sunlit prison of the American dream." Tracking alongside Bigger as he escapes the Black Belt and moves into the city is the dark shadow of this illu- sory freedom of possibility. Claiming his crime, Bigger has become precisely the mirror that Baldwin recognizes, the mirror that reflects "confusion, dishonesty, panic" and its concomitant immobilization in the prison of impossible dreams. Ironically, maps printed in the news- papers showing which portions of the city the police have already searched for him contribute to giving him a sense of overview of his surroundings and thus a grip on the chaos of the larger city.[78] With this new sense of overview emerges a more intentional and

spatiotemporal renegotiation of his "inevitable twoness." However, although carrying the prison with him may sound like a realization of the liberal subject as Foucault conceives of it, this internalization does not mean he can escape the prison from without. As this section proceeds, it becomes apparent that there is not only a duality but a seemingly unresolvable conflict between his agency and the white parts of the city that he traverses:

[W]hat he had thought about it had made it real with a reality it did not have now in the daylight. When lying in the dark thinking of it, it seemed to have something which left it when it was looked at. Why should not this cold white world rise up as a beautiful dream in which he could walk and be at home.[79]

It should but it cannot—"something [is] missing, some road which, if he had once found it, would have led him to a sure and quiet knowl- edge. But why think of that now?"[80]

FATE—THE ACTUAL PRISON

As readers of African American literature, we, like Jackson, are prepared for the accumulating catastrophes "that lead so many blackmen to the prison gate."[81] All routes out of the city have been blocked to prevent his escape, and Bigger's momentary flight from the "line" between the white and the Black city and within himself is blocked and replaced as his imprisonment is reinforced by, and materialized in an even tighter, darker skin—that is, in the small, dark container of his body in an actual prison cell. The temporality characterized by a lack of futurity in the Black Belt—the imprisonment of segregation—which seemed to open toward personal agency and movement—the prison of the American dream—is now replaced by "a long stretch of time that was very short." Here, there is no day or night, and no need to be afraid or hateful since these emotions, like his body, are contained by the uncon- ditional spatiotemporality of his cell and will thus not lead anywhere.[82] Initially, this ultimate form of imprisonment seems to de-activate, or even de-actualize his whole being. He goes entirely limp, just sitting or lying down; he does not eat or drink, and allows his body to be shoved about. He is "in the grip of a deep psychological resolution not to react to anything,"[83] seized by an "organic wish to cease be."[84] After a while, however, Bigger begins to awaken to a new sense of himself and the world. The prison, it turns out, opens an additional tipping point, one involving the stakes of a more conscious and critical perspective. Connecting his crime with his sense of alienation, he realizes that his earlier "will to kill"—his Fanonian impulse to use violence to escape despair and inaction, which found its inadvertent realization in Mary Dalton's bedroom—is intimately connected with his will, his subdued hope and desire, to somehow become part of the world.[85]

This final section stands at the center of numerous readings of the novel, readings which tend to underscore one of two differing perspectives: One that reads and evaluates it in terms of its natural- istic and deterministic traits as a protest novel, and another that reads it rather as an existential struggle for individual self-realization.[86] In naturalist readings, the vehement and elongated defense articulated by Bigger's white, leftist, visionary lawyer Boris Max that takes up most of this section has been regarded as a literary failure in its ideo- logical explicitness. Existential readings have, in turn, seen the atten- tion to the political message in this section as overshadowing Bigger's individual struggle.[87] Max, argues McCann, treats Bigger as an "instru- mentalized trope" rather than as "a full subject,"[88] and the extent to which readers tend to focus on Max's perspective in the novel's third section mirrors, Gibson suggests, the degree to which Bigger as an individual has become invisible.[89] Charles Scruggs, in turn, proposes that Bigger's possible fates are tied to "the two faces of the 'fabulous' city he lives in": a demonic one represented by the State Attorney and a paradisal one offered by Max. While the former is but a confirmation of his prospects, Bigger is unable to see and respond to the latter.[90] I argue, however, that this final part of the novel opens for a more articulated and explicit critical reflection that illuminates and connects Bigger's individual consciousness with a critical one. In fact, Bigger's individual struggle is wrought precisely by the way in which his own vision can finally critically transcend his own fate, allowing him to gain, for the first time in his life, "a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of."[91]

Max cannot help Bigger get out of prison. Although it is too late to save Bigger's life, the lawyer comes to serve as a connection point between the inside and outside, not only of the actual prison walls, but also of the conceptual, existential, experiential, and, not least political, spatiotemporal imprisonment that has characterized Bigger's entire life. With his awakening and sense of connection surfaces a new will— not a will to kill nor, only, a will to merge with the world but a genuine will to critically evaluate it—to gain his own cognitive overview. The prison merges with the city as Bigger envisions:

> [A] black sprawling prison full of tiny black cells in which peo- ple lived; each cell had its stone jar or water and a crust of bread and no one could go from cell to cell and there were screams and curses and yells and sufferings and nobody heard them, for the walls were thick and darkness was everywhere. Why were there so many cells in the world? But was this true?[92]

Because he envisions a city that in turn mirrors a larger failure of civi- lization, argues Scruggs, Bigger cannot see the love, tenderness, and generational memory that Wright envisions in his autobiographical *Black Boy*

(1945); Bigger "lacks those 'intangible sentiments that bind man to man.'"[93] I would suggest, however, that the view from the prison actually helps him, as well as readers of the novel, to gain a critical vision infused with love. Here, we can also see how the trope of blindness—exemplified, among other things, precisely through the empty stare of "black windows" described earlier in the novel[94]—is overturned. After "a life of confinement," as Terry Bozeman puts it, "it is the moment of actually being inside the steel and concrete cage that offers any meaning to his life, and he is able to see the realiza- tion of 'possibility' before him."[95] The actualized prison enables Bigger and readers alike to see the prison of his segregated city, not from the perspective of his own single, impotent, and claustrophobic point of view but as a totality. I would suggest therefore that Bigger's "awakening" is ultimately less about an articulation of self-awak- ening from his previously "circumscribed horizons" made possible by phenomenological reduction, as Tuhkanen argues,[96] and more about a structural critical perspective provoked precisely by the cumulative layering of imprisonments. The interaction with Max, as Tuhkanen notes, provides Bigger with a different sense of possibility than "the immobility of 'fear' or the reactive, manipulative movement of 'flight.'" This is a possibility characterized, rather, by "respite of rest," by a loos- ening of "the immediacy of lived time," which in turn opens up "a creative space in the relentless course of events that have tightened its grip on him."[97] If Bigger was, as Zora Neale Hurston once suggested, stuck in "the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low down dirty deal,"[98] he now begins to transcend the low down dirty deal that has captured his body and see himself and others in a less reactive and more active fashion.

Identifying the novel's layering of multiple configurations of imprisonment allows us to recognize the critical potential of this "respite of rest," this loosening of "the immediacy of lived time." Ironically, the dialogics that the categorical and spatiotemporal divi- sions of society have done their best to undermine emerge when the walls of the prison have materialized to the point of no return. The novel's gradual concretization of these walls generates an exposure of power that is no longer limited to Bigger's incessant and impotent affirmation of an individual oppressed position, but one that grows into a critical exposure of the sprawling city of tiny black cells. The distinctly embodied and phenomenological dimensions of this vision underline Wright's conviction that the writer "plants flesh" upon the "skeleton of society" laid bare by Marxism and induced by the writ- er's "will to live."[99] At this point, Bigger both senses and cognitively recognizes society as a prison while also recognizing its multiplicity of voices and experiences a sense of connection.

At first, as we have seen, Bigger's small window for gaining freedom of movement initially seems to lie in the reactive strategy of preempting a position that has already been assigned to him. As Tuhkanen has shown us,

this can be read through Lacanian paranoia and mimicry of a position to which you have been forcefully ascribed; Bigger engages the prejudice that surrounds him and thus "hides" behind paranoid knowledge. Wright's novel shows how this racialized paranoid mode is prescribed by the incessant presence of the prison. It seems to confirm that there is only one way that Bigger can read society and only one way that he can be read by it. In this sense, it shows precisely how society is bound, as Baldwin puts it, "together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into that void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden."[100] As we have seen, Bigger's view of himself and society is always already caught up in this both inside himself and in society: his life and fate are already "spread out" before and behind him. As *Native Son* and numerous other fictional and historical narratives have shown, this is not necessarily a paranoid trait at all but rather a realistic reflection of Black life in a racialized and racist society. From this perspective, society prescribes a continual soci- etal nurturing of negative affect, a nurturing that eclipses and prohibits any alternative. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out, the nurture of positive affect becomes unthinkable in view of the constant anticipation of disappointment and humiliation.[101] Forestalling pain becomes a self-reinforcing as well as self-defeating strategy.[102] What else is Bigger's narrative and what else propels his journey forward? "Though he had killed by accident," he does not once "feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was Black and he had been alone in a room where a white girl had been killed; therefore he had killed her."[103] The interlinking configurations of the prison in Wright's novel bring into view how the constant expectancy and preemption of malevolence locks society and man together in a cumulative negative affect that seems to exclude any other option.

Once incarcerated in the actual prison toward the end of the novel, Bigger attains a sense of overview of racial oppression that transcends his own perspective. However, the sense that all is connected—a trait typically associated with paranoia—also enables a critical position that transcends the individual. He is finally able to mourn his own life as well as the "open" imprisonment of his people. Davis writes that, "Within the contained, coercive universe of the prison, the captive is confronted with the realities of racism, not simply as individual acts dictated by attitudinal bias; rather he is compelled to come to grips with racism as an institutional phenomenon collectively experienced by the victims."[104] In Bigger's case, the prison also makes it possible to confront the "contained, coercive universe" outside of the prison. There and then, it becomes possible for him to begin to reach beyond his own subjection and question a society built round layers of confine- ment. At the same time, and crucially, this also makes him want to listen to other people's voices, to think that they might be there, "and warm!"[105]

Through its literary layering of imprisonment, *Native Son* illumi- nates how Bigger's discernment of this larger perspective entails his struggle's transformation. In its earlier configurations, Bigger "had been most alive, most himself when he had felt things hard enough to fight for them" but "now here in this cell he felt more than ever the hard central core of what he had lived. As the white mountain had once loomed over him, so now the black wall of death loomed closer with each fleeting hour. But he could not strike out blindly now; death was a different and bigger adversary."[106] Thus, when the layers of imprisonment have accumulated and literally taken concrete shape, it is not just death that stares him in the face but a society of imprisonment. He no longer fights as if the only way to stay upright is by means of hard words or kicks against a cramped environment, but recognizes a larger, messy, and highly flawed world full of hatred, prejudice, and oppression, but also of many other aspects, situations, and relations—of people he would have liked to know. With Bigger—a character recurrently disdained for the damaging effects of his inex- orable brutality—thus emerges a nascent critical political conscious- ness. Just perhaps, Bigger begins to think, there may be "a set of words which he had in common with others, words which would evoke in others a sense of the same fire that smoldered in him."[107] In the "double vision" with which he now looks upon the world, one side consists in recognizing himself as alone and about to be executed, but the other sees "life, an image of himself standing amid throngs of men, lost in the welter of their lives with the hope of emerging again, different, unafraid."[108]

CONCLUSION

The two "remarkably stubborn" categorizations of the novel as either a naturalistic protest novel or as an existential one of self-realization have, Ian Afflerbach notes, continued to dominate the novel's recep- tion over the decades, and are typically seen as mutually exclusive: "[T]he actions of a character are either seen as determined by the social and biological drives they helplessly follow, or as a triumphant form of self-determination."[109] Philip Goldstein situates these differing inter- pretations and their evolution in relation to the changing contexts of its reception. Neither the protest novel nor naturalism carry the same connotations in the twenty-first century as they did in the mid-twen- tieth, while literary criticism has also evolved, allowing for different conceptions and configurations of these genres and their implications and endowing them with different political import.[110] Symptomatically, and in the light of these conventional divisions, the novel has also been read, in the twenty-first century, as an allegory of reading,[111] and even as an allegory of political judgment itself, as the presence of both tendencies in the novel and its divided reception point to a historical struggle between collective

reform and individual self-real- ization of a liberalism in crisis.[112] To put it briefly, the novel can thus be read as comprising what McCann calls a "heteroglossic interpre- tative context"—as a confluence of internal and external voices—as a "rhetorical agent."[113] As all these examples suggest, the novel's critical reception has not only been of the novel as such, but also very much of literature's role in the political project.

A key question throughout is not so much if, but how literature should be engaged in this project. What is good literature and can (and should) it both be brutal and didactic and stylistically complex? Or does the latter stand in inevitable opposition to the former? Or is it precisely the creative power and beauty of literature to convey emotion and nuance that makes it political? Where Baldwin's argument turns against didacticism and brutal realism, he was himself criticized for letting aesthetics trump politics. As Addison Gayle Jr., once stated, "I can muster no sympathy for the Baldwins of the world," as they distort the perspective and confuse whites by suggesting, through an affluent Black middle class perspective, that the problem belongs in a "universal, metaphysical arena."[114] Still, and although he regarded and guarded Wright as a yardstick for the Black Arts Movement, Gayle Jr. ultimately agrees with Baldwin that the beauty, power, and fear of the human being is completely eclipsed, in *Native Son*, by the novel's "insistence that it is [Bigger's] categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended."[115] For Gayle Jr., however, this failure is less of the genre of the protest novel and more of the naturalistic one, where the individual's categorization by overpowering societal forces is generic.[116] Such perspective, he suggests, illuminates that while Wright was largely true to the formula of naturalism, the "insurmount- able barrier of color" in his writing created a formidable "wedge" between reality and illusion that introduced in his writing a "schizo- phrenic quality, wavering, as did the lives of those whom he wrote about, between pragmatism and transcendence."[117] Along similar lines, Irving Howe underlines that while Wright's novel shares many traits with naturalism, it breaks with one of its key generic conventions— its commitment to scientific detachment. In its place, Wright offers a nightmare, "a kind of expressionistic outburst," that forces readers to take on "Bigger's cowering perception of the world."[118]

Examining how characters in Wright's novels are recurrently subjected to the existential and physical brutality of strict and unfor- giving confinement allows us to further elaborate on the nature and the implications of this critical "wedge." Across his oeuvre, Wright's char- acters are typically caught up in and undermined by a space and time that is clearly not for them.[119] In *Native Son*, as we have seen, Bigger's position is unsparingly inflected by accumulative modes of imprison- ment that seem to disable freedom of movement as well as critical over- view. The novel thus initially generates an image of the Black man as embodying a single and impotent position capable of little else than to take on the mask of expectation and reflect the circumscribed position that he

inhabits. As I noted at the beginning of this essay, many of the novel's contemporary readers despaired at the image of its protago- nist's callous brutality, which only seemed to add to the existing domi-nant prejudice against African Americans. But while incarceration is largely co-extensive with African American existence, as I also under- lined at the beginning of this essay, Wright's literary configuration of it ultimately invites a more complex and productive critical posi- tion. Although Baldwin is right that Bigger's tragedy is that he "has accepted a theology that denies him life" through most of the novel, I would suggest that the novel does not, in the end, reject life and the "beauty, dread, power" of the human being as both Baldwin and Gayle Jr. argue.[120] Nor does Bigger, as Scruggs maintains, ultimately choose self-definition over community.[121] Rather, the novel demonstrates the usefulness of actively linking the relationship between three layers of the prison—the imprisonment of segregation, the "sunlit prison" of the American dream, and real prison walls—thus providing a way of understanding challenges to individual as well as collective agency in the light of racial incarceration.

Thereby, *Native Son* illuminates formidable links not only with its own Jim Crow contemporaneity, but also with a history of incarcer- ation from the slavery era to the New Jim Crow of the twenty-first century. Through the layerings of imprisonment, Wright combines the brutal realism and political significance stipulated by many contem- porary Black radicals with the complex stylistic potential of literature that Baldwin called for. As I hope I have shown, *Native Son*—like its author an icon of African American writing in general and of the brutal realism of the Black Arts Movement in particular—can and should help us as we strive to identify the role of race "in defining the basic struc- ture of our society." This "must begin," Alexander maintains, "with dialogue, a conversation that fosters critical consciousness."[122] As the prison walls materially and existentially concretize Bigger's alien- ation, he recognizes, as Douglass once did about slavery, that is not his individual alienation, but the alienation produced by the institution that he must fight.[123] Like Douglass in the late nineteenth century and Davis in the late twentieth, Wright reminds us of what the millions of Blacks in prison in the US and those fighting toward its abolition in the twenty-first century already know: While their oppressors may, mistakenly, see their own freedom as an "inalienable fact," freedom is not a static quality, but something to be fought for and gained.[124]

NOTES

1. Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (New Press, 2010), 14.
2. Angela Y. Davis, "Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition," In The Angela Y. Davis Reader, ed. Joy James (Blackwell, 1998),102.
3. Sentencing Project, The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons, 2021. https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/

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5. Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 82.
6. Malcolm X, "Message to the Grassroots," 1963, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-mal- colm-x-message-grassroots/ retrieved June 12, 2024.
7. Alexander, The New Jim Crow, 4.
8. James, Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Penguin, 2017 [1955]), 19.
9. Richard Wright, "Introduction: How 'Bigger was Born," in Richard Wright
10. Native Son (Penguin, 2020 [1940]), Wright, 3.
11. "Introduction," 5.
12. Baldwin, Notes, 21, 23.
13. Houston A. Baker Jr. "Introduction," In Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. (Prentice-Hall, 1972), 10.
14. Isabel Soto, "'White People to Either Side': 'Native Son' and the Poetics of Space," The Black Scholar 39: ½, (2009): 23–4.
15. Baldwin, Notes, 20.
16. For just a few examples, see Donald B. Gibson, "Wright's Invisible Native Son," American Quarterly 21:4, (1969), 728–738, Ramsey, Priscilla. "Blind Eyes, Blind Quests in Richard Wright's Native Son," CLA 24 (1971): 48–61; Robert James Butler, "The Function of Violence in Richard Wright's Native Son," Black American Literature Forum 20:1/2 (1986): 9–25; James Nagel, "Images of 'Vision' in Native Son," §Critical Essays on Richard Wright's Native Son, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Hall, 1997), 86–93; Karl Precoda and
17. P.S. Polanah, "In the Vortex of Modernity: Writing Blackness, Blindness and Insight," Journal of Modern Literature 34: 3 (2011): 31–46; Ian Afflerbach, "Liberalism's Blind Judgment, Richard Wright's Native Son and the Politics of Reception," Modern Fiction Studies 61:1 (2015): 90–113, 93.
18. Tara T. Green, From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature, ed. Tara T. Green (Mercer University Press, 2008).
19. Alexander, The New Jim Crow, 4.
20. Alexander, The New Jim Crow, 12.
21. Richard, Wright, Native Son. London: Penguin, 2020 [1940], 33.
22. Wright, Native Son, 454.
23. Soto, "'White People,'" 23.
24. Wright, "Introduction," 30.
25. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Constance Farrington
26. (Penguin Books, 1963), 55, 73.
27. Arnold Hirsch, Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940–1960 (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 4.
28. Wright, Native Son, 51.
29. Wright, Native Son, 49–50.
30. Wright, Native Son, 279.
31. Wright, Native Son, 61.

32. Wright, Native Son, 100–1.
33. Angela Y. Davis, “Unfinished Lecture on Liberation – II,” In The Angela Y. Davis Reader, ed. Joy James (Blackwell, 1998), 53.
34. Davis, “Unfinished Lecture on Liberation – II,” 53.
35. Davis, “Unfinished Lecture on Liberation – II,” 57–8.
36. Davis, “Unfinished Lecture on Liberation – II,” 54.
37. Hagar Kotef, Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On the Liberal Governances of Mobility (Duke University Press, 2015), 9.
38. Kotef, Movement and the Ordering of Freedom, 66
39. Kotef, Movement and the Ordering of Freedom, 9.
40. Kotef, Movement and the Ordering of Freedom,17.
41. Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others (Duke
42. University Press, 2006), 3.
43. Angela Y. Davis, “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” In
44. The Angela Y. Davis Reader, ed. Joy James (Blackwell, 1998), 49–50.
45. Wright, Native Son, 271.
46. This reactivity is also underlined formally. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has pointed out, the third-person narrative perspective describes Bigger rather than gives him voice. Unlike Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952), whose first-person narration underlines its unnamed protagonist’s voice throughout, making him a character who “shapes, edits, and narrates his own tale,” Bigger remains voiceless, powerless to act beyond reaction (see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism [Oxford University Press, 1988, 124]). As later readers have noted, however, Bigger does find his own voice toward the end of the novel, one that stands out also because it trumps both the narrator’s and the lawyer’s at this decisive moment: “What I killed for, I am.” Thus, “Bigger’s achievement of voice,” toward the very end of the novel has been seen to “stand[s] as a symbol of the purpose of Afro-American literature. See John M. Reilly, “Giving Bigger a Voice: The Politics of Narrative in Native Son,” in New Essays on Native Son, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Cambridge University Press, 1990, 60).
47. Wright, Native Son, 51.
48. Wright, Native Son, 51–2.
49. Wright, Native Son, 52.
50. Baldwin, Notes, 22–3.
51. Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology, 5–8.
52. Wright, Native Son, 117.
53. Wright, Native Son, 119.
54. Baldwin, Notes, 20.
55. Baldwin, Notes, 23.
56. Wright, Native Son, 127.
57. Tuhkanen, American Optic, 45.
58. Wright, Native Son, 143.
59. Jackson, Soledad Brother, 4.
60. Wright, Native Son, 136.

61. Mikko Tuhkanen, American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright (State University of New York Press, 2009), 53.
62. Tuhkanen, American Optic, 51.
63. Wright, Native Son, 136.
64. Wright, Native Son, 136.
65. Wright, Native Son, 194.
66. Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 74.
67. Bryan J. McCann, "Dialoging with Bigger Thomas: A Reception History of Richard Wright's Native Son", Advances in the History of Rhetoric 22 (2019), 96.
68. Wright, Native Son, 135.
69. Wright, Native Son, 137.
70. Mikko Tuhkanen, Richard Wright's Oneiropolitics," American Literature
71. 82:1, (2010), 158.
72. Richard Wright, The Man Who Lived Underground: A Novel (Library of America, 2021), 75.
73. Wright, Native Son, 135.
74. Wright, Native Son, 136.
75. Wright, Native Son, 251.
76. Wright, Native Son, 304.
77. Wright, Native Son, 271.
78. Wright, Native Son, 272.
79. Wright, Native Son, 271.
80. Wright, Native Son, 270–1, italics in original.
81. Davis, "Unfinished Lecture on Liberation – II," 56.
82. Wright, Native Son, 271.
83. Wright, Native Son, 271.
84. Tuhkanen, American Optic, 60.
85. Wright, Native Son, 276.
86. Wright, Native Son, 271–2.
87. Wright, Native Son, 272.
88. Jackson, Soledad Brother, 4.
89. Wright, Native Son, 303.
90. Wright, Native Son, 304.
91. Wright, Native Son, 374.
92. Wright, Native Son, 304.
93. See Philip Goldstein, "Richard Wright's Native Son: From Naturalist Protest to Modernist Liberation and Beyond," In New Directions in American Reception Study, ed. Philip Goldstein (Oxford University Press, 2008).
94. Thus, for example, Donald B. Gibson argues that this section is very much about an existential struggle that is a universal, human one rather than a racialized one. See Donald B. Gibson, "Wright's Invisible Native Son," In Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son, ed. Houston A. Baker (Prentice-Hall, 1972), 97.
95. McCann, "Dialoging," 105.
96. Gibson, "Wright's Invisible," 97.

97. Charles Scruggs, Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel
98. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 72 and 92 respectively.
99. Wright, Native Son, 390.
100. Wright, Native Son, 391.
101. Scruggs, Sweet Home, 93.
102. Afflerbach, "Liberalism's Blind Judgment," 95.
103. Terry Bozeman, "Mind-Blown: Possibility and Trauma in Native Son, In From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature, ed. Tara T. Green (Mercer University Press, 2008), 78.
104. Tuhkanen, American Optic, 157.
105. Tuhkanen, American Optic, 172.
106. Cited in Gates Jr., The Signifying Monkey, 195.
107. Wright, cited in McCann, "Dialoging," 97.
108. Baldwin, Notes, 20.
109. Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 135–6. Here she leans on Silvan Tomkins.
110. Sedgwick, Touching Feeling, 137.
111. Wright, Native Son, 135–6.
112. Davis, "Political Prisoners," 46.
113. Wright, Native Son, 391.
114. Wright, Native Son, 443.
115. Wright, Native Son, 393.
116. Wright, Native Son, 393.
117. Afflerbach, "Liberalism's Blind Judgment," 91.
118. See Goldstein, "Richard Wright's Native Son" for a longer discussion of
119. these changing critical contexts.
120. Karl Precoda and P.S. Polanah, "In the Vortex of Modernity."
121. Afflerbach, "Liberalism's Blind Judgment," 101.
122. McCann, "Dialoging," 94.
123. Addison Gayle Jr., "The Children of Bigger Thomas," The Addison Gayle Jr. Reader. Ed. Nathaniel Norment Jr. (University of Illinois Press, 2009), 436.
124. Addison Gayle Jr., "A Defence of James Baldwin," The Addison Gayle Jr. Reader, ed. Nathaniel Norment Jr. (University of Illinois Press, 2009), 206 (quotation from Baldwin).
125. Gayle Jr., "A Defence of James Baldwin," 206.
126. Addison Gayle Jr., "Richard Wright: Beyond Nihilism," The Addison Gayle Jr. Reader, ed. Nathaniel Norment Jr. (University of Illinois Press, 200), 208.
127. Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," In Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Native Son, ed. Houston A. Baker (Prentice-Hall, 1972), 65.
128. In The Outsider (1953), Cross Damon "was not really in the world; he was haunting it for his place, pleading for entrance into life" (Richard Wright, The Outsider [Vintage, 2021] [1953], 141), and in The Man Who Lived Underground, Fred Daniels is caught "between that terrifying world of life-in-death above him and this dark world that was death-in-life here in the

underground" (Wright, The Man, 133).

129. Baldwin, Notes, 23.
130. Scruggs, Sweet Home, 97.
131. Alexander, The New Jim Crow, 15.
132. Davis, "Unfinished Lecture on Liberation – II," 56.
133. Davis, "Unfinished Lecture on Liberation – II," 55.