Violence and Black Masculinity in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940)

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Original Article

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Abstract

Throughout African American history, black men have struggled to re-construct their identities through a constant renegotiation with the negative stereotypes created around black manhood. Confronted with marginalization, discrimination, and racial oppression, black men persistently fought against a number of psychosocial challenges to articulate their experiences and reshape their subjectivity. Authors like James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Chester Himes have not only depicted the devastating African American male experience that was a product of the Eurocentric notions of black masculinity, they have also attempted to redefine African American men's identities that deviate from the dominant narratives. Richard Wright's Native Son (1940), in particular, explores this process of the construction of black masculinity through a re-reading of black-white power relationship. Drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" (1903) and bell hooks's reflection on the repercussions of an "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (2004), this article explores Wright's construction of black male identity in the novel. Critically analyzing the character of the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, within the above framework, the paper argues that an interaction with oppressive systems of power shapes black men's double consciousness, which gives rise to violence as a source of reclaiming their masculinity. While previous research has focused on Bigger's identity formation through his relationship with both black and white communities, this paper adds to the scholarship by analyzing the role of violence as a product of oppression that shapes his masculinity.

Keywords: Masculinity, Richard Wright, Bigger Thomas, Double consciousness

Throughout African American history, black men have struggled to re-construct their identities through a constant renegotiation with the negative stereotypes created around black manhood. This persistent struggle with determining a sense of self in the face of racial oppression, discrimination, and violence has profoundly impacted the social and psychological development of African American men. African American writers have, especially over the past few decades, sought to foreground the marginalized existence of black men in the American society by depicting the socio-historical experiences of African Americans resulting from their confrontation with interlocking systems of oppression. African American male writers have not only interrogated the way white gaze has contributed towards creating black masculine identity, but they have also provided alternative ways of perceiving and living black identities. In this

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regard, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) is a seminal text about the construction of black male identity. This article critically analyzes Wright's *Native Son* within the framework of bell hooks's theorization of an "imperialist white supremacist patriarchy" (2004) and W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" (1903) to argue that an interaction with the oppressive systems of power creates a condition of psychological two-ness in black males, which both distorts their sense of self and gives rise to violence.

In writing *Native Son*, Wright has brought together centuries of the horrors of slavery and neo-slavery that have shaped African American identities, based in a "psychology of timidity, passivity, and even cowardice" (Rampersad, 2005, p. xi). The history of slavery, which is the history of America itself, provides the required background to understand the novel's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, who was born and raised in the Chicago slums (Wells 2010). The novel is set in Chicago during the Depression era; the massive Northward migration of African Americas during the 1920s and the 1930s created marginalized black men like Bigger who were rendered "environmental fugitives". In focusing on this period, the novel calls attention to the "social and environmental practices that create the slums in which they are confined" (Lambert 2016, p. 76). This marginalized position of black men shaped their masculinity in significant ways. Critically analyzing the protagonist's search for masculine identity in the novel within the framework of the theoretical ideas borrowed from bell hooks and W. E. B Du Bois, this paper argues that Bigger's interaction with oppressive systems of power shapes his double consciousness, which gives rise to violence as a source of reclaiming his masculinity. This research is significant as it adds to the existing research on the role of violence, as a product and consequence of oppression and exploitation, in shaping black masculinity.

Scholarship on *Native Son*

Since its publication in 1940, *Native Son* has been read and re-read from multiple angles to understand the struggle of its protagonist, Bigger Thomas; the living conditions of blacks in the urban slums; the issue of black violence; and the viability of the American criminal justice system. Critics have analyzed the way black and white relations are depicted in the novel highlighting the inability of white systems of power to gauge the damage that they have caused to black people, mostly in the form of racial stereotyping (Afflerbach 2015; Lambert 2016). Indeed, this "racist ideology assimilates all sexual relationships between black men and white women to rape" (Peterson 2010, p. 161). Scholars have also noted the blindness of the white "world of power and control" to black desire to gain self-respect and humanity (Ellis 2006, p. 187). The repercussions of this interaction have impacted the lives of black people by creating a void in their personalities and psyches, giving rise to violent attempts on their part to escape this blindness (Matthews 2014).

Special focus has been laid on the development of the character of Bigger Thomas in the context of his relationship with both the black community and the white world (Phipps 2015; Takeuchi 2009; Wells 2010). Alan W. France notes that Bigger reacts to the white world's treatment of him in his own relationships with women, both white and black. He argues that Bigger avenges his "diminishment, the stunning and warping effects of racial oppression" through "violent and phallocentric appropriation of womens…. Both belong to a system in which the Other is marginalized and dehumanized" (1988, p. 422). Hence, Wright creates an ambivalent character in Bigger Thomas who transforms from being a symbolic "Negro" to a universal human being finally realizing that he may have to create a separate identity from the one given to him by white America (Gibson 2001; Arman 1978). However, while previous research has focused on Bigger's identity formation through his relationship with both black and white communities, this paper

analyzes the role of violence as a product of oppression that shapes his masculinity. Drawing on bell hooks and W. E. B. Du Bois, the paper explores how Bigger's interaction with oppressive systems of power shapes his double consciousness, which gives rise to violence as a source of reclaiming his masculinity.

Construction of Black Masculinity: Double Consciousness and Imperialist White-Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy

This section draws on bell hooks's conception of the "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" and W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" to study Richard Wright's construction of a violent black masculinity. hooks uses the expression "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" in her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004). The book addresses the ways in which various systems of oppression have worked together to damage the African American community specifically black men who are indiscriminately portrayed as "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers" (hooks 2004, p. xii). In order to promote this inhuman and violent image of the black male, systems of power underlying the American social order interact with one another. hooks's imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is thus a matrix of power structures which "doesn't value one system over another". Indeed, it "is an interrelated system of domination that will never fully empower black men" (p. xiii). It is inclusive of a "global context" of domination as "an interlocking system" that does not allow black men to seek liberation from its stranglehold. The system is apparent in "symbolically lynching masses of black men, choking off their very life" as well as in "widespread unemployment and the continued psychological lure of life-threatening patriarchal masculine behaviors" (p. xiv).

hooks believes that this imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy works towards "undermining the positive agency" of African American men, thus distancing them from the struggle for freedom (p. xv). In having "imprisoned and slaughtered black males active in … black power movements", the U.S., for hooks, qualifies as an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (p. 51). Besides, this system works to create a divide between black men and women through its "refusal to allow black males full access to employment" while offering relatively better employment opportunities to women (p. 8). In socializing black men into dominating and controlling others, this system "prevents most of them from having access to socially acceptable positions of power and dominance" hence pushing them to adopt "socially unacceptable channels" (p. 58). The multiple ways in which this interlocking system works is a useful lens for studying Richard Wright's construction of Bigger Thomas's character in *Native Son*. Drawing on hooks's conception, this paper argues that an interaction with these systems of power not only deprives black men of positive avenues of social engagement and development but also facilitates the construction of a violent black masculinity.

This paper also draws on W. E. B. Du Bois's notable concept of "double consciousness" elaborated in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) in order to further analyze the impact of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal system on black masculine psyche and subjectivity. The idea of double consciousness, reflective of a unique African American experience, refers to the individual consciousness of one's identity as split into two parts—one's perception of oneself and one's perception of the world's perception of oneself. Du Bois describes it as such: "a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two

thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 2). In this way, double consciousness indicates a psychological tension between two different identities; while claiming their Americanness, African Americans must also look at themselves via the white gaze. This conflict deprives the otherwise 'free' African American of "freedom in his promised land" (Du Bois 1994, p. 158). This entails the challenging circumstance of maintaining one's sense of self while, at the same time, combating systematic racism and oppression imposed by white America. These conflicting perceptions of one's self—as useful, active, and ambitious yet perceived as the opposite on account of belonging to a certain race—cannot coalesce, thus hindering the creation of a positive self-consciousness.

Indeed, Du Boisian concept of double consciousness as an ever-existing feeling of "two-ness" that is rarely assimilated, is the normative condition of African American experience. Despite having gained "self-consciousness, self-reflection, and self-respect", African Americans struggle with the "weight of … ignorance" and the "hereditary weight mass of corruption from white adulterers" that pushes them towards "the shadow of dark despair" (Du Bois 1994, p. 13). The experience is an essential factor in shaping African American subjectivity and becomes the reason behind the negative stereotyping of the African American individual who wishes "to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the door of opportunity closed roughly in his face" (p. 2-3). Du Bois further contends: "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world" (p. 2). Du Boisian double consciousness thus describes the confusion, uncertainty, and despair experienced by African Americans in their endeavor to attain self-awareness. This paper draws on the concept of double consciousness to understand the construction of black masculine subjectivity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The paper seeks to argue that violent black masculinity emerges in the novel as a consequence of Bigger Thomas's double consciousness, which, in itself, is a product of his interaction with a deeply embedded system of oppression that hooks terms imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Bigger's constant engagement with this system not only confronts him with his "two-ness" but also forces him to reclaim his identity through the only medium (violence) available to him.

Violence and Black Masculinity

Richard Wright's *Native Son* is laden with the motif of violence that recurs throughout the text. Indeed, the very first scene of the novel relates the protagonist, Bigger Thomas's violent encounter with a huge rat in their filthy apartment in the early hours of morning. As the text opens, Bigger is thrust into a fight with "over a foot long" rat that has grown big eating garbage or "anything else" (p. 6). The screams of "hit 'im" and "kill 'im" are the first indicators of violence in the novel (p. 5). The narrative draws parallels between the rat and Bigger Thomas as hated victims of the environment that produces them. Indeed, the act of killing the rat foreshadows the two murders that Bigger goes on to commit. His mother warns Bigger that the rat could "cut our veins at night when we sleep" (p. 9) and that one morning he could "find his sister dead" (p. 9). This reverberates Mary's murder, for Bigger is shown to have the same potential as the rat to cut someone's veins at night and murder them. This happens without Bigger's intention to do so: the act is as instinctive and unintentional as it could be in a rat's case. Wright asserts that the instinct to kill is as natural to Bigger as biting may be to the rat. It is significant that Bigger's mother considers his lack of manhood responsible for their circumstances: "we wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you" (p. 8). The mother, in a way, assumes white

patriarchal masculinity as normative which marginalizes black manhood provoking a violent response in black men.

The novel is set in the Chicago south-side in the 1930s which is split into a luxurious white world and a deprived white slum. The white supremacist patriarchal power structures push African Americans to the margins where they are forced to live amidst garbage and filth. As Bigger notes: "I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence" (p. 20). In this way, peripheries are created for the underprivileged to make one's own position central. Blacks in the novel are confined to the Black Belt and are not supposed to rent a house in the white community. Bigger Thomas travels from his 'ghetto' on the outskirts to the center of the city every day to work for the Dalton family. Living on the margins, Bigger and his friends not only have a clear notion of their blackness, but they also understand how the white world perceives them. This situation becomes further complicated for Bigger and other black men and women when they are confronted with whites like Mary and Jan, a speciously "liberal" young white couple, who try to befriend blacks in their service. Mary and Jan share their table with Bigger; take their opinion in matters of significance, and keep them close company; in doing so, they believe that they are giving them equal rights. However, this instead exposes black men to another kind of harassment which is evident in the wrongful accusation of rape that dooms Bigger. Ironically, African Americans are kept at a safe distance to prevent the harm they could cause to the so-called civilized white society, and it is this separation which makes black people feel inferior and deprived thus posing them as a violent threat to those who are responsible for creating this divide. Despite befriending them however, Mary and Jan are unable to bridge the deeply rooted divide between them that is grounded in interlocking systems of oppression.

Like an average young American man of his age, Bigger Thomas dreams big by imagining himself as a pilot and an accomplished young man: "I *could* fly a plane if I had a chance" (p. 17). The doors to individual liberty and the American dream are shut on blacks: "I reckon we the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go and do what we want to do" (p. 21). It is, in fact, the denial of opportunity that makes him feel marginalized, aggressive, and vengeful. While the normative ideals make it necessary for black males to assert their manhood, they are constantly denied the right to professional opportunities, decent family life, or prosperous households. Deprived of what is their due, black men thus attempt to re-create their manhood outside their homes, in streets, poolrooms etc. Bigger and his friends also engage in a "game of play-acting in which he and his friends imitated the ways and manners of the white folk" (p. 17). Because they are unable to support their families physically, emotionally, psychologically, or financially, black men neither gain the respect of their family nor are they able to achieve self-realization. This is apparent in Bigger's mother's despairing comment: "Sometimes I wonder why I birthed you" (p. 8). Being rejected as incompetent and a nuisance by both black and white communities, they resort to violence to reclaim the manhood denied to them. When his dreams go unrealized, Bigger's lets out his energy in outbursts of rage: "Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships?" (p. 20). This consciousness of being a capable young man, on the one hand, and a threat in the eyes of the white world on the other, ultimately expresses itself in the two murders that Bigger commits that give him a sense of "manhood", however negative.

Indeed, the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal power structures are blind to the needs and desires of black men, which is apparent in the use of blindness as a recurrent motif in the text. The inability of white people to interpret and analyze Bigger Thomas's psyche

and circumstances allow for a misreading of his character. The destiny of Bigger Thomas is tied to the physical blindness of Mrs. Dalton; to his own family's blindness to his dilemma; and consequently, to the blindness of everyone around him oblivious to the meaning of his life and existence, "a meaning which others did not see" (p.106). Bigger's existence is a perpetual struggle combating this invisibility. His realization that "Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton was blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind; yes, blind in more ways than one" (p.107) endorses Richard Wright's claim about the blindness of the American society, their sheer inability to acknowledge, let alone change, the oppressive conditions of African Americans. Wright clearly indicates that this blindness, if carried on unchecked, will plunge America into some form of national disaster: "Everytime I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me" (p.20).

This dehumanization of black people is reflected in the text through the use of animal metaphors and imagery. The contradictory construction of Bigger Thomas both as a human being and as one with animal instincts and behaviors throughout the novel as well as in the trial scene foregrounds the double consciousness that African Americans experience in a white supremacist American society. The system is oppressive at multiple levels; in constructing Bigger as less-than-human, it not only justifies his social and economic deprivation, but it also exempts the social and legal structures from examining the reasons behind his actions. Ironically, this eliminates the need for a court trial. Similarly, during the police chase to arrest Bigger, the way Bigger is tracked down reminds the reader of the "narrow circle" (p. 5) the rat was pushed into at the beginning of the novel, leaving no space for it to hide. While Bigger is trying to get hold of the rat, the background voices "Hit 'im", "Kill 'im" (p. 5) echo the voices later heard in the courtroom "Kill 'im now", "Lynch 'im" (p. 373) that refer to Bigger himself. Similarly, he abuses the rat with the same words that are later used for him "that sonofa*bitch*" (p. 6). Just as the rat threatens the safety of Bigger's family, Bigger and other black men are perceived as a threat to the safety and life of white Americans.

The deeply embedded stereotype of black masculinity as a threat to white womanhood is reflected in the novel via the false accusation of rape against Bigger as well as his accidental killing of Mary Dalton. His murder of Bessie, his black girlfriend, on the other hand, is suggestive of Bigger's renunciation of his family and friends in an attempt to escape his black identity. As these connections tie him to his black existence, in breaking these ties, Bigger rejects the stifling life that he is condemned to live. He even rejects black religion and spirituality in his desire to get away from all that has become a reason for his failure as a human being. Indeed, Bigger is at a constant war with himself; in his attempt to escape from Du Boisian "two-ness", Bigger wants to put an end to the war of identities going on inside him. The political, economic, and judicial system that he is entrenched in has categorically classified Bigger as a brute against the civilized white American man. Indeed, while the judgment could have been pronounced the very moment that Bigger was found in Mary's room by Mrs. Dalton, in elaborating the events leading up to his trial, the text shows how the murders committed by Bigger and the desperate attempt to escape are acts of violence aimed at tackling his double consciousness and reconstructing his identity. The sudden attention that Bigger receives after murdering Mary thrills him out of those recesses of marginal existence into which he had descended from the moment of his birth, towards a sense of self, however distorted. He does not like his attorney, Max's questions because "[t]hey made me think and thinking's made me scared…" (p. 424). The only condition for blacks to survive is to remain oblivious of their own existence and the effectiveness of their actions. It is for

this reason that though Mary's murder was unintentional, it jolts Bigger out of his lifelong oblivion as he was being held accountable for having done something, for having acted.

It comes as a surprise to Bigger that he is being chased down by thousands of people for a crime he had hardly planned. The text asks how the law makes a person responsible for an action when society denies them the very right to be conscious of their existence and circumstances. Bigger is baffled by the court proceedings which make him accountable for his actions. Being someone who has never acted freely and was never allowed to, Bigger is pleasantly surprised at this sense of identity that violence brings him: "I sort of saw myself after that night. And I sort of saw other people, too" (p. 425). Indeed, violence grants him power and agency that were always denied to him; as such, taking the "responsibility for the murder … made him feel free for the first time in his life" (p. 396). Living in the dark recesses of the society, black people have been marginalized at various levels: they are pushed to the outskirts of urban hubs; they live the lowest form of existence on the boundaries of humanity; and they reside at the edges of white consciousness. After committing Mary's murder, Bigger journeys towards self-determination and enjoys taking responsibility for his actions. The sense of freedom and accomplishment that Bigger feels after committing two murders is an alarm for the American society just as it was for Max whose eyes were "full of terror" (p. 429) when Bigger asserts "it must have been good" (p. 429). These two murders that open a whole new world of power and control to him should toll a bell for America that has let only one course open to Bigger to gain self-consciousness, assert his humanity, and claim his manhood. Bigger seems to break away from his constructed self and rejects the notion of a powerless black body that the white world has reduced him to.

The court scene is the epitome of the way white power structures impact black subjectivity and create conflicting black masculinities represented through the views of Max and Buckley. Disseminating two contrasting views on the origin and treatment of crime and the criminal, the scene is a comment on the irrationality of the oppressive structures of domination and subjugation. In this debate, Boris Max, Bigger Thomas's defense attorney, acts as the mouthpiece of Richard Wright, advocating Bigger's humanity. In contrast, David Buckley, the state attorney, who represents white power structures, is focused on establishing Bigger's inhumanity. An analysis of his arguments gives an insight into the causes behind the crime committed by blacks. Wright deconstructs the American criminal justice system to show how the very system produces violent black men and then wishes to eradicate the product of its own engineering. It traces the flaws inherent in the American social and judicial systems that ignore the very processes that give rise to violence and crime by the marginalized groups. Max's defense is a plea to hate the crime instead of despising the criminal and demands social justice for blacks. Indeed, Max draws attention of the court and the audience to the irrationality and incomprehensibility of Bigger's situation as representative of black masculinity.

The "two-ness" resulting from Bigger's interaction with the imperialist white supremacist system is nowhere more apparent than in the court scene. The racist tendencies of the proceedings reduce Bigger to a mere symbol of violent blackness denying him any individuality and personality. The entire black race is represented, humiliated, and abused via the figure of Bigger. Their forbidding presence is represented as a threat to white America who is nevertheless blind to their existence. The novel shows that America had too long been oblivious of the existence of a race who bore the burden of holding the foundation of a capitalist economy and satiated the ravenous appetite of criminal justice; thus, Bigger's death penalty had to be "more

than mere punishment" (p. 276). It appears that no matter how hard African Americans may try to better their condition, their efforts would meet failure for they were "unlucky…born for dark doom" (p. 275). Max becomes Wright's mouthpiece when he speaks about the inability of law and justice to find a solution to "the black problem": "The more you kill, the more you deny and separate, the more will they seek another form and way of life… And out of what can they weave a different life, out of what can they mold a new existence, living organically in the same towns and cities, the same neighborhoods with us?" (p. 397-398). The court scene thus mocks the blindness of the American judicial system to the violence that it engenders.

David Buckley symbolizes the hate, indifference, and prejudice of white America against black men. In looking at Bigger "unblinkingly" (p. 13), he also reflects the blindness of the other white characters in the novel towards black people. In threatening the court of the consequences of letting "black mad dogs" like Bigger go free, Buckley reads the black condition contrary to how Wright conceives it (p.409). To the white gaze that Buckley represents, Bigger is a beast who can never learn from the civilization that defines white America; hence the latter denies the right of existence and freedom to blacks because "they fear" them and are "anxious to keep [them] under control" (p. 276). For Wright, however, Bigger reflects a different kind of terror that can engulf America. This terror is a product of the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal system that renders some people less worthy; Bigger could be black or white, male or female, representing any political or racial ideology. Indeed, the novel makes it clear that racial segregation may act like William Blake's poison tree bearing venomous fruit for its growers. Thus, the roots of future waves of terror are present in today's oppressive environment. However, Wright's prophecy of terror offers an optimistic reading, too. The identification of terror and its reasons may give America a chance to eradicate its very sources. Wright has identified weak spots in the fabric of the American society that have the potential to bring down the entire structure. It is now Americans' job to cement those weak spots in the edifice before they shake the whole structure off its feet. And this is what Wright has intended to achieve through *Native Son*.

Thus, *Native Son* challenges Bigger's construction as the violent criminal by showing his embeddedness in an interlocking system of oppression that provides violence as the only medium of expression. Bigger Thomas and other black men in the novel constantly interact with oppressive systems of power which shapes their double consciousness, thus giving rise to violence as a source of reclaiming their masculinity. Throughout the narrative, Bigger's desire to claim normative masculinity is thwarted by white power structures that systematically deny him any power or agency. And the final closing of the prison's heavy steel door with a loud clang is indicative of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal structures' refusal to grant black men access to the world from which they are forever severed. Wright suggests that this refusal will forever work towards shaping black men's split consciousness, making them resort to violence to assert their identities.

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