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MAGNA

Philosophy and Literary Theory

Re-placing the Semiotic Bar

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Ferdinand de Saussure argued that language should be thought of as a system of arbitrary and differential semiotic signs, which were each composed of a signifier (the psychological impression that sensing a sign makes) and a signified (a unit of cognition).¹ Jean Baudrillard critiqued de Saussure's signs by arguing that the semiotic bar, which divided the signifier from the signifieds, could no longer separate the two entities.² The goals of this paper are to examine Baudrillard's critique of the system of signs and to rebut it by re-placing the semiotic bar. Since this is fundamentally a textual question, I will facilitate the process by considering "The Call of Cthulhu" by H.P. Lovecraft.³

In the story, the ancient city of R'yleh, which is home to a race of extraterrestrials called the Great Old Ones, had been submerged for millennia, causing the powerful inhabitants to lay perpetually dormant. However, lore, and possibly telepathy, had motivated a cult of believers to try to free sleeping Cthulhu, the priest of R'yleh, from the underwater city.

A boatful of cultists set out in a yacht to find R'yleh, but their voyage was cut short when they attacked a schooner and the schooner's crew annihilated the cultists. A recent earthquake, however, had exposed

¹ F. de Saussure, 'Nature of the Linguistic Sign', in ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, trans. W. Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966, pp. 65–70.

² Baudrillard, J., *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S. Glasser, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

³ I chose to examine "The Call of Cthulhu" because the style and content of the story mirror the confusion and wildness of a post-structural mindset.

some of the pillars of R'yleh to the schooner's crew, and they decided to explore. In the process, they opened a gate, and Cthulhu escaped. At the sight of the monster, several crewmembers died, but two men, Johansen, and a crewmate, were able to retreat to the boat. Cthulhu pursued the fleeing sailors with great speed, so they turned around and rammed their ship through Cthulhu. Cthulhu burst, but he began to reform. The sailors escaped; Johansen made it all the way back to his home in Norway, where a collision with a man dressed as a sailor caused the Norwegian to collapse and die without a medical cause.

While this is happening, on the opposite side of the globe, the artist Wilcox dreamed of Cthulhu and, in a frenzy, brought a bas-relief depicting his dream to Professor Angell, an expert in ancient scripts. Angell, having previously seen a different statue of Cthulhu and having heard about the cult, began investigating, which led him to correlate Wilcox's delirium with several societal and environmental disturbances. Angell, however, also ran into a man dressed as a sailor and died in a similarly mysterious fashion. After Angell's death, the narrator, Thurston, found Angell's notes, prompting him to look into the matter. He discovered Johansen's story, which he relayed to the reader. At some unknown time, Thurston dies too without a known cause.

Clearly, at the center of the story is the motif of collapse: Angell and Johansen fall; Cthulhu bursts; the whole story is collapsed onto paper. Several critics have advocated that Lovecraft is attempting to depict the unimaginable by highlighting the shortfalls of language and narrative.^{4,5} Other theorists have argued that the motif of collapse is an assault on the very notion of subjectivity.^{6,7}

What all these explanations fail to account for is that the collapse in the story is generative. The deaths of Angell and Johansen lead to new discoveries. The collapse of Cthulhu leads to the reincarnation of Cthulhu. The very idea of destruction is put into question by the way the story is told, which is in a contra-temporal order and within a series of frames. Everything, including death and destruction, is recycled within

⁴ K. Matolcsy, 'The Monster-Text: Analogy and Metaphor in Lovecraft', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1/2, 2012, pp. 151-159.

⁵ C. Sederholm, 'What Screams are Made Of: Representing Cosmic Fear in H.P. Lovecraft's "Pickman's Model"', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2006, pp. 335-349.

⁶ C. Carrolles, 'H.P. Lovecraft's The Call of Cthulhu: an Intermedial Analysis of Its Graphic Adaptation'. *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-15.

⁷ G. Harman, 'On the Horror of Phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl', *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, vol. 4, 2010, pp. 3-34.

other frames. Moreover, the frames do not even have a clear end because the first line of the short story creates a frame that seems to extend beyond the text, “(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston).”⁸ It seems less and less like H.P. Lovecraft was writing about collapse as much as he was collapsing the idea of the collapse itself. In the story, Lovecraft also literally conveys this intention with a couplet, “That is not dead which can eternal lie, / And with strange aeons even death may die.”⁹

Within that couplet, the word “lie” appears to be paronomastic in its use. Throughout the story, the motifs of sleep and deception are closely related. Thurston is unable to sleep because he believes reality is illusory, “I shall never sleep calmly again when I think of the horrors that lurk ceaselessly behind life in time and in space.”¹⁰ Moreover, the ideas of death, another interpretation of “eternal lie,” and deceit are also closely tied. The narrator theorized about some “secret methods and poison needles” used to kill his uncle.¹¹ The existence of Cthulhu, the incarnation of death, was described as invoking “eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order.”¹²

Implicit within all these descriptions is the idea of a hidden and disturbing reality being exposed, making everything the characters have known illusory. However, the analogy that Lovecraft used to open the story implies not that what have known is less real than the Great Old Ones, but that the Great Old Ones are simply unknown:

We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.¹³

How is it possible to reconcile the idea that reality is hidden, but that the hidden reality is no more real than its veil? The duplication and twisting of reality implied by this question were central to the ideas of Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*. At its core, Baudrillard’s book was

⁸ H. Lovecraft, ‘The Call of Cthulhu’, in S. Joshi (ed.), *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, New York, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 139.

⁹ Lovecraft, p. 156.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹² *Ibid.*, 167.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

responding to the idea of signification, that a semiotic sign could stand in for a referent. Rather than thinking that the sign of an apple referred to an apple, he believed the sign of an apple pointed only to other signs, doubles which were all equally unreal. With regards to the Great Old Ones, this would mean that Cthulhu was no more real than its banal shroud, and it is the realization of this doubling that makes the character so terrified in “The Call of Cthulhu.” Baudrillard’s explanation works well at explaining the thoughts of Lovecraft, but why would Baudrillard believe this?

The starting point for his work was the semiotic sign, which is made up of two inextricably linked psychological parts, the signifier and the signified. The signifier, the mental state caused by hearing a word or seeing a sign, recalls the signified, the currency of thought. Baudrillard thought that this distinction was problematized by simulation, which he defines as “to feign to have what one doesn’t have.”¹⁴ A simulator makes a false claim to have access to reality when that is no longer possible. Baudrillard found a good example in a family he saw on TV, the Louds, whose lives were broadcast for a reality show. Baudrillard’s primary criticism of the Louds’ show was with the premise and the slogan of the show:

“They lived as if we were not there.” An absurd, paradoxical formula-neither true nor false: utopian. The “as if we were not there” is equal to “as if you were there.” [... it is] the pleasure of an excess of meaning, when the bar of the sign falls below the usual waterline of meaning: the nonsignifier is exalted by the camera angle. There one sees what the real never was (but “as if you were there”), without the distance that gives us perspectival space and depth vision (but “more real than nature”).¹⁵

Baudrillard believes that the Louds’ show lowered the semiotic bar to the point that much if not all of what was signifier had become signified because the Louds’ producers claimed to give you the signified (seeing the family’s life) while removing the act of signification (changing reality by watching). Without the act of signification, one no longer must perceive a sign to get the meaning. Instead, everything has collapsed to the point that the signified is already inside their head. Under de Saussure’s model, when we look at the screens of our televisions, the image is a signifier, which is exchanged, within our head, for the signified. The success of this exchange relies on a distance between the interpreting part of our minds and our television screens. Baudrillard was arguing that we have, however, lost this distance, so everything that is

¹⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

experienced or thought is composed of pure signifiers. Due to this removal of the act of signification, everything collapses into the viewer and into what is outside the viewer.

By a Baudrillardian account, the story consists of everything collapsing into something real, but more real than nature. The real Angell must die to be replaced by Angell's unfiltered thoughts written on paper. The same thing applies to Johansen. Even Cthulhu must be replaced by a more real Cthulhu. A strength of this interpretation is how well it can explain the strange introductory note, "(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston)"¹⁶ because the whole story must be collapsed to make it more real than if the reader just randomly picked up some madman's ravings.

The issue with Baudrillard's ideas is not textual, but practical. Baudrillard thought that simulation batted the possibility for there to be substantive political change:

This anticipation, this precession, this short circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model (no more divergence of meaning, no more dialectical polarity, no more negative electricity, implosion of antagonistic poles), is what allows each time for all possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all true, in the sense that their truth is to be exchanged, in the image of the models from which they derive, in a generalized cycle.¹⁷

Baudrillard argued that the result of the simulation was that any ideological explanation of the world was able to account for any event, causing it to be impossible to look beyond the current ideology and make the world better. Therefore, it is important not just to accept simulation because it is successful at explaining "The Call of Cthulhu," but to try to restore signification.

If we accept Baudrillard's argument that the semiotic bar can no longer successfully divide a psychological signifier from a psychological signified, then it is important to look elsewhere for a signifier and a signified. The signifier and signified are inextricably linked but are entirely distinct. I propose that to restore signification, the best move is to look toward binary themes in the story. Specifically, I think we should consider the broad and opposing themes of the Self, that which is known, and the Other, that which cannot be known.¹⁸

¹⁶ Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", p. 139.

¹⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 17.

¹⁸ Themes like Self and Other are capitalized to distinguish them from semiotic signifiers.

It cannot simply work to say that the Self is the signifier and the Other is the signified because the signifier and signified must be two parts of a whole, not opposites. For this reason, I propose that the signifier be the Self and the Other and the signified be neither the Self nor the Other. Obviously, the semiotic bar between these two terms cannot be lost because they are logically necessarily distinct. Additionally, the signifier and the signified are linked together because they form a whole continuum; the Self and the Other are defined against a baseline of being unknown and the converse is obviously true.

Therefore, we have reproduced the signifier and signified relationship with regard to some themes. Nevertheless, if we have truly reinvigorated signification and re-placed the semiotic bar, then the sign that we have identified must have a referent. In other words, the movement between the Self and the Other and the not Self and the not Other must refer to something in the story. Under de Saussure's system of signs, each semiotic sign had multiple referents; the word scarf refers to many scarfs. Therefore, the thematic sign that we have identified likely also has many referents, so the most prudent thing to do seems to once again choose a vague and relevant theme such as Death.

By this understanding, we have produced a signifier and a signified that necessarily cannot be collapsed into each other. However, it is possible to move between them, and that motion would necessarily have to route through Death, so to the extent that Death is signaled by the movement between the signified and the signifier, Death makes sense as a referent. It seems like we have made the kind of sign that should be able to stand up to simulation necessarily.

So, what does this mean for our analysis of "The Call of Cthulhu?" How can we reclaim it using the new conception of the sign? We have already created a semiotic chain as a basis for the sign, but the terms of that sign turned out to be generic. I propose now that we consider the sign in relation to the story. It seems to me the next move to take is to return to the text for some of the literal deaths of the story and to consider how well our ideas of Death work at describing these deaths. We have already shown that the sign that we have constructed can operate without collapsing, but we need to what relationship it bears to the story:

Let us first consider the death of Professor Angell, which sets the whole plot in motion:

My knowledge of the thing began in the winter of 1926–27 with the death of [...] Angell. Professor Angell was widely known [...] The professor had been [...] falling suddenly

[...] after having been jostled by a nautical-looking negro [...] Physicians were unable to find any visible disorder, but concluded after perplexed debate that some obscure lesion of the heart, induced by the brisk ascent of so steep a hill by so elderly a man, was responsible for the end. At the time I saw no reason to dissent from this dictum, but latterly I am inclined to wonder – and more than wonder.¹⁹

By the accounts of the thematic sign, Death occurs as the collapse of the Self into the Other or vice versa begins to swing in the opposite direction. This seems like a paradigmatic shift from the living Self to the dead Other with his literal collapse marking his transition between the two. By this understanding, he Died twice; his first Death occurred upon contact with the sailor when he transitioned from the static point of a famous professor to neither Other nor Self. His second Death occurred upon his movement from being neither the Other nor the Self that his collapse brought to being a pure Other that his inexplicable death brought. It is worth noting that if he is ever Other, he is also Self. When he is famous and living, he holds the secret of his knowledge of Cthulhu, which makes him Other. When he is made Other by his death of an unknown cause, he is brought into the Self by the flexibility of medicine to explain the unexplainable. A similar explanation applies to the death of the sailor Johansen, who also held the secret of Cthulhu and was killed by a sailor.

Cthulhu's death presents an even more interesting case than Angell's:

There was a bursting as of an exploding bladder ... and then there was only a venomous seething astern; where [...] the scattered plasticity of that nameless sky-spawn was nebulously recombining in its hateful original form.²⁰

Cthulhu holds the position of the Other for the story until his death, which is brought about by the movement to a new position in which it is neither known nor unknown. It is Other because Cthulhu could never be understood, but it is given familiarity by the fact that he returns to the same form as before as if there is something set and understandable about his body. Its death matches its Death.

Let us consider the parenthetical note at the beginning of the first page of the story, "(Found Among the Papers of the Late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston)."²¹ Obviously, this note states that

¹⁹ Lovecraft, p. 139.

²⁰ Ibid., 168.

²¹ Ibid., 139.

Thurston had died, but it did more than that. Stories have a weird role; it seems like whenever a text is thought of as a text it must hold the position of neither the Other nor the Self. A text is Other otherwise there is no point in reading because anything that can be gained from reading could be gained much more successfully through experiencing. Reading, at best, would be a lesser sort of experience. Meanwhile, the reader has direct access to what is read. The processing of reading occurs inside of the reader; what is read can be accessed like a thought or an experience. The parenthetical note that begins the story moves the story from the weird spot of not Other and not Self to pure Otherness as it becomes framed. It is someone else's story and as such, it can never be known to us. Even if we found the manuscript on an old table in Rhode Island and not among fiction pieces, it would be impossible to verify its truth as it has become permanently unknown. With the move to Otherness, we start an oscillation between Self, Other, and neither, which results in several Deaths and deaths within the story.

Now that we have taken some time to think about specific Deaths and deaths in the story, let us take a second to consider what Baudrillard wrote about Death for comparison to our results for Angell. This seems like a worthwhile task as it tells us how true our interpretation has been to Baudrillard's theory is. If we find that we are wildly deviating from what he wrote in our conclusion, either we made a mistake or he did. Baudrillard describes the hyperreal system in terms of death:

It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself - such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance.²²

Baudrillard here is positing that in the hyperreal system, it is required that an object dies to be resurrected. The real can no longer be left to exist because it must be collapsed and replaced as a sacrifice to prevent the whole collapse of the simulated system. In fact, this deletion is the kind of thing that our symbol of death can provide an elucidating explanation for. Nothing Other than myself (or even inside myself) can exist as a real object unknown by the hyperreal system, which must contain everything. Even my own existence as a Self is caught in the

²² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 140.

crossfire and killed by the collapse of perspectival space. Everything is shifted to a new space, where the Other and the Self do not make sense. This move marks the Death of the real.

In trying to make a sign for Death to reinvigorate Death, we might have forgotten that we have made a sign for Death. Let us conclude by considering exactly what we have found about Death. There are two positions, Other of Self, that a position can (or cannot) occupy. Holding any position puts her or him on the brink of Death. Backing away from the brink, crossing the semiotic bar is exactly what causes Death. In other words, the repulsion of Death is attractive.

Alternatively, a person could be not holding any position. Death comes to him or her as soon as s/he lands on any position. For him or her, Death is the act of lowering, of grounding. The attractions of stasis, which are what drew us to our project of rethinking the semiotic bar, are a drive toward Death. Staying up in the top half of the sign is the Baudrillardian strategy. It is successful at avoiding Death, but it has all the problems of infinite spiraling that we talked about earlier. If we started with a Baudrillardian reading, we would be stuck with the Baudrillardian problem, and deviation would be punished by Death. However, we started with a structuralist outlook, and as such, we are stuck on the bottom of the sign, standing at the edge of Death. This seems to be the only place to stand as we have cleared a space to operate without Death or the spiraling of a positionless reading.

The implications of re-placing the semiotic go well beyond attaining a deeper understanding of Lovecraft's work. First, I have addressed Baudrillard's argument that substantive political change is no longer possible by opening a space away from simulation by restoring signification. Second, restoring the semiotic bar has opened the possibility for a system of signs to once again be a viable model for meaning. An exploration of thematic signs as a semiotic system could potentially yield some interesting results.

The goal of this paper was to re-place the semiotic bar in "The Call of Cthulhu" to rebut Jean Baudrillard's critique of signs. We did this by reimagining the signifier and signified as logical permutations of themes rather than psychological entities. In doing this, we have found a model for signs that necessarily stand up to Baudrillard's criticism.

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Savage Natives and Heathen Chinese: Education as a Weapon against Culture

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Abstract

With a self-strengthening movement in the late 1800s, it seemed as if China grew out of its subordinate status in relation to America. However, the foundation of this movement, the Chinese Educational Mission, has always been viewed as the successful beginning to an effective movement, and yet the mission resembles the Native American Boarding Schools that were used in America to decimate this minority culture through their children. This paper compares a variety of parallels between the two educational movements by analyzing both first-person accounts of students and teachers from each program along with the actual laws that were implemented. This comparison lends a fuller picture of the motivations behind both educational systems, showing how both were, in reality, ways to Americanize and whiten students instead of teach them. By revealing the Chinese Educational Mission not as a benefit to China but really a self-whitening movement, this paper questions the basis of China's rank in the international world and offers a clearer context to the unstable power dynamic between the two countries that defined both China's place and the place of the new Chinese Americans in subsequent years.

Between 1860 and 1890, both China and America had a realization that they could use education to deal with the cultures they began to see as outdated in the international rush for modernization, mirroring each other not in practice but in motivations and effects to erase and rewrite these cultures. Within Qing-run China, Westerners

fervently vied for influence over this plentiful source of goods,¹ trapping China between trying to reap the benefits of trade and maintaining control. However, the increasing number of treaties forced upon China that took away much of their autonomy² caused the Chinese to reexamine both their relationship with foreign powers but also their culture which allowed for these losses. In America, the modernization of the world highlighted a different cultural issue: Native Americans. During the 18th century Western expansionist movement, the United States government did not account for needing to deal with Native Americans³; Now fully expanded in the 1800s America needed to quickly determine what made these Native groups less “American” than white American culture and from there what to do with them. With both countries restructuring their national culture and world relationships, they brought it upon themselves to rectify these issues through education, specifically the Chinese Educational Mission of 1872⁴ and the Native American Education movement that started in the 1880s. However, while the Ivy League education of the visiting Chinese students could not compare in terms of living conditions to Native American boarding schools that spearheaded the “education” movement, from conception to the practice, and finally to the result, the two movements shared a range of similarities in the underlying goals and results revealing how this passionately welcomed Chinese Educational Mission that shaped the relationship between both countries and its people was just an ardent “self-whitening” movement in disguise.

Preceding 1871, technological stagnation was what forced China into an unstable environment open to any solution that would allow it to succeed in the changing international world order. During the late 1800s, to maintain order in China, the Qing prevented any social or technological advancement.⁵ From the point of view of the ruling Qing, the Chinese were and would always be superior to Westerners by merit of their brand of racial superior ideology, so there was no need to improve themselves and certainly not look to places such as Europe and America for ways to advance. However, as proof of the mistrust in the

¹ Robert L. Tignor et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart: From 1000 CE to the Present*, 4th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 678.

² *Ibid.*, 679.

³ Ulysses S. Grant, “Third Annual Message,” (Speech, Washington, DC, December 4, 1871), *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29512>.

⁴ Tignor et al., *Worlds Together*, 679.

⁵ CEM Connections, “Living and Learning in New England,” [cemconnections.org](http://www.cemconnections.org), last modified 2006, accessed February 24, 2017, http://www.cemconnections.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=36.

stagnant methods of the Qing in the ever-changing atmosphere of the industrializing 19th century, the Taiping Rebellion was launched in 1850.⁶ Consumed with radical anti-government sentiments, this rebellion that capitalized on many revolutionary ideas such as Christianity and extreme morality⁷ was eventually squashed. The ideas, however, remained and gave a different and extreme perspective of what China could be. Contrary to the ruling class that favored remaining ignorant,⁸ this rebellion opened a door for the common people and many bureaucrats to find a solution to their crumbling infrastructure. Though the goal was to find a solution to help China, these ideas were built on shaky ground being contrary to the Qing's rule; this contrarian behavior made it so that any solution that was found automatically initially went against the Qing's views, creating an uneven yet optimistic path forward.

Meanwhile, the United States was facing a similar problem, their Western Expansionist movement had brought to light the lack of adequate remedy to their "Indian problem," thus forcing the US to reinvigorate Social Darwinist views in a contradictory effort to destroy these native people to absorb them into American Society. Despite a great vigor for Western Expansion, there was no set solution for America's "Indian problem" of how to deal with the original inhabitants of America.⁹ However, the "frontier thesis" of Frederick Jackson Turner, though delivered in 1893 a few years after the creation of Native boarding schools, summarized the ideas that had been building for the last few decades. He states that every American was originally formed by first accepting the wilderness of Native-run America and then "little by little he transforms the wilderness...In the crucible of the frontier, the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race."¹⁰ This popular idea was formed from ideas on how to deal with the Native American people; by viewing them as this backward group of savages firmly rooted in the stage before being fully American, mainstream America was able to see an opportunity to evolve these people out of the "wilderness." Having reached the West Coast and no longer being able

⁶ Vincent Yu-chung Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), x.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Liel Leibovitz and Matthew I. Miller, *Fortunate Sons: The 120 Chinese Boys Who Came to America, Went to School, and Revolutionized an Ancient Civilization* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 39.

⁹ Hiram Price, *Indian Commissioner Price on Civilizing the Indians. Extract from the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1881*, in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, by Francis Paul Prucha, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 155.

¹⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Frontier in American History," 1893, in *For the Record: A Documentary History of America*, by David E. Shi and Holly A. Mayer, 6th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 61.

to push the expansion, Turner's proposition solves this problem by using the destruction of Native American culture and their subsequent conversion to remind Americans that their civilized greatness was in contrast with the original wilderness. This ideology fueled measures like the Dawes Act that weakened reservations,¹¹ and it allowed Americans to not just identify themselves as the superior race but more importantly form a consensus on how to move forward with their conversion plans for the general betterment of the United States.

The US government's classification of Native American culture as something to be converted for the supposed greater good resulted in America settling on education to completely erase their culture only to replace it with allegedly real American beliefs. Now with a set perspective to view Native Americans the rest of America desired a solution. Because America believed that it had evolved from their savage days of the frontier, they could not simply kill all of them as they had done in the past. Fortunately in 1869, many years before it would take effect, the radical solution of providing schools was proposed to teach Native peoples, especially children, to "live like the white man."¹² Later in 1881 according to the Indian Commissioner report "savage and civilized life cannot live and prosper on the same ground...if the Indians are to be civilized and become a happy prosperous people, which is certainly the object and intention of our government, they must learn our language and adopt our modes of life,"¹³ meaning that Native American culture was not simple inferior in American eye but could not even exist and through education, it would be destroyed. Eradicating this old, obsolete culture and spreading their civilization was the burden of white America, and by carrying this weight they were helping both the "inferior race" and themselves. This destruction of culture most likely seemed humane to many Americans for they were allowing for the backward, savage, Native people to become prosperous by joining the already enlightened civilization. In the eyes of the mainstream American, the death of an entire culture was better because it was not killing them and it was sanctioned by the superior race. Now mainstream America had found a solution. No longer did they need to ignore Native Americans; they could use their alleged superiority to set an example. Through education their problem was solved, the inferiority of Native

¹¹ Henry Dawes, "The General Allotment Act (Dawes Act)," 1887, in *Major Problems in American Indian History: Documents and Essays*, by Albert L. Hurtado and Peter Iverson (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1994), 370.

¹² Board of Indian Commissioners, "Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners," 1869, in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, by Francis Paul Prucha, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 133.

¹³ Price, *Indian Commissioner*, in *Documents of United*, 156.

Americans was acknowledged by a consensus and the transformation of the wild culture could commence to benefit both parties.

With education as a solution being popularized in America, the quickly growing desire to start an educational mission for China's improvement caused the missions' initially safe and guarded appreciation of Western technology to develop into a consuming idolization of American culture and ideas. To embrace the modern age China started its self-strengthening movement focused on learning Western sciences.¹⁴ Li Hung-chang, a scholar-official, commented that China would improve by learning "that which the foreigners are good at" while keeping the idea that the "Chinese [could not] be inferior to the Westerners in ingenuity and intelligence."¹⁵ From this view, China could improve without going against its deep-rooted beliefs and continuing to see Westerners as inferior. However, while the goal was sound, the actual execution brought about a dangerous idolization. When Yung Wing, the first American-educated Chinese student, was picked as the leader, he declared that "through Western education, China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful."¹⁶ Being the main proponent of the mission, Wing's influence defined the focus of the Educational Mission. His views were a dramatic shift from the more traditional perception of Westerners as a source to exploit. This idea was dangerous in that it defined China's position as inferior in comparison to America. Though troubling, Yung Wing's views were not surprising, for he could be described as having a "thorough assimilation with American ideas."¹⁷ It is only logical that when he took the responsibility as leader of the mission, he would bring some of the Social Darwinist ideologies to China about how to educate weakened groups. Not only did he turn away from the old Chinese view of the West, but he also did not even make them equals. Not dissimilar to the Native Americans, Yung Wing was applying the same principles of creating a relationship defined by the superior saving the inferior; in this case, he made China the inferior. The Educational Mission was created as a major portion of the self-

¹⁴ Wen Bing Chung, "Reminiscences of a Pioneer Student," 1923, in *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*, by Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang, and H. Mark Lai (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 30.

¹⁵ Kwang-ching Liu, "The Confucian as Patriot and Pragmatist: Li Hung-chang's Formative Years," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, no. 30 (1970): 19, doi:10.2307/2718764.

¹⁶ Yung Wing, A.B., LL.D., *My Life in China and America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1909), 41.

¹⁷ The New York Times, "China's Educational Mission; Why the Scheme Is Abandoned – An Illiberal Spirit Predominant," *New York Times* (New York), July 16, 1881,1, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9905E1DA103CEE3ABC4E52DFB166838A699FDE&legacy=true>.

strengthening mission,¹⁸ but in its conception, instead of raising the Chinese; it simply put them in the place of an uncivilized group waiting to be saved by America's guiding culture.

American superiority was not the only belief used to ensure cultural dominance; the desire of Christian Americans to help Native Americans and their children further spurred the educational movement and foundation of off-reservation boarding schools. As the publicity of the "Indian problem" was brought to the forefront of the American people's purview, many Christian groups brought it upon themselves to aid in the educational movement.¹⁹ In 1882 a government report stated that "one very important auxiliary in transforming men from savage to civilized life is the influence brought to bear upon them through the labors of Christian men and women as educators and missionaries."²⁰ While this message seemed to support Native Americans, the reality was that they were still seen as savages even by these religious groups. Additionally, by making this a religious matter the motivation to educate Native Americans grew into not just an issue based on the benefits it might yield but on the morality of the American people, meaning that they could do no wrong in their efforts to educate away the Native American culture because it was the right thing to do. In the Lake Mohonk Conference, it was stated that every Native American "must have a Christian education ... [that] can be best acquired apart from his reservation and amid the influences of Christian and civilized society,"²¹ demonstrating that in part due to Christianity the idea of off-reservation boarding schools came. Because the reservations were so savage and immoral in the eyes of the Christian faith, only through transplantation into a society run by American religions was education possible. With the backing of seemingly morally just groups, the eventual problems that included starvation or abuse in 90 percent of children in some schools²² could be written off as the necessary sacrifices for the noble purity of civilized life. Since going against the destruction of Indian culture meant going against the Church, this educational movement cemented its place in America.

¹⁸ Leibovitz and Miller, *Fortunate Sons*, 83.

¹⁹ Hiram Price, *Indian Commissioner Price on Cooperation with Religious Societies. Extract from the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1882*, in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, by Francis Paul Prucha, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 157.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Lake Mohonk Conferences of Friends of the Indian, "Program of the Lake Mohonk Conference," 1884, in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, by Francis Paul Prucha, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 163.

²² Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco, Calif.: City Lights, 2005), 33.

Similarly in China during the stage of conception, the perceived need for these programs allowed for the religious enlightenment “lower races” to become a tenant that was championed by the Chinese founders as a way to help China. In the late 19th century, China was impenetrable to Christian missionaries. Not only were they widely unpopular the people that they did convert were subject to “social ostracism.”²³ So it would follow that the Chinese Educational Mission would not focus on Christian teaching to educate the students. However, similar to the idolization of America, Yung Wing’s American-centric biases continued to contort the mission, promising that China needed “to establish an educational system of graded schools for the people, making the Bible one of the textbooks.”²⁴ While having the Bible as a textbook did not seem a radical step for Wing, the underlying meaning behind it went against the ideals of China. By having the Bible as a main textbook Wing channeled the religious groups of Americans by ignoring an important tradition he perceived as antiquated: the Confucian texts. During the 19th century, the Chinese educational system was based around Confucian texts and exams,²⁵ but due to Yung Wing’s own need to accomplish the American goal of “Christianizing the Chinese,”²⁶ having Christianity as a priority for the students opened up China to the missionaries. Instead of keeping with the traditional Confucianism, by shaping the Chinese Educational Mission, and by extension the self-strengthening movement, like the Native Americans this belief made it so that even though they would lose the reverence of old ways, Confucianism, it would not be a problem because Christianity would be there to replace it. Though unlike the Native Americans instead of feeling the effects of a forced cultural loss, the Chinese just let their own, traditional culture slip away in favor of enlightening the influence of Christianity.

During the Educational Mission, the seclusion from their families and the immersion in American culture allowed the Chinese students to devalue and lose their traditional behavior and customs. While there were preexisting missionary schools in China, Yung Wing stated that the program would fall apart without the seclusion that the schools provided in America²⁷ to be fully immersed in American culture. While this may

²³ The New York Times, “Christian Missions in China,” *New York Times* (New York), September 16, 1894, [Page #], accessed February 19, 2017, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9C00E5DC1131E033A25755C1A96F9C94659ED7CF&legacy=true>.

²⁴ Leibovitz and Miller, *Fortunate Sons*, 68.

²⁵ Joseph Richmond Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), xxii.

²⁶ Wing, *My Life*, 43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

have been a benefit, the previous motivations that were moving away from Chinese culture and ideals were only intensified in the isolated American atmosphere. Due to living with host families, each student was to spread out and live with an American family for 15 years per the Chinese Educational Movement agreement.²⁸ These parameters would allow for the Chinese students to embrace far more than just American knowledge, but culture as well. Instead of learning in missionary schools within China, these students were surrounded by American culture, constantly inundating them with American-centric views as Yung Wing had. These effects were more clearly seen in their fascination with baseball, the epitome of American ideals of athleticism that the Chinese simply did not believe in.²⁹ Their welcoming of baseball demonstrates that not only were they taking in American ideas but turning away from Chinese ones. Additionally accentuated by many of them playing baseball, some students began resenting their queues. Required by the Qing of all Chinese citizens, the queue morphed into a symbol of difference and oppression rather than the national pride that the Qing intended. Multiple children even went as far as cutting off their queues,³⁰ and while they were sent home for this, it still keyed into the desire to forget their national heritage. Later, queue cutting would be used to rebel against the Qing,³¹ but already the Chinese students were feeling the effects of becoming so consumed by American culture that they felt the need to cut all ties with their Chinese one.

Though more extreme in methods of enforcement, the isolation from the off-reservation boarding schools allowed for a similar constant application of pressure on students to unlearn their heritage, resulting in a dismissal of their families' own culture. Similar to the Chinese, the United States government decided that the best way to educate Native American children was to transplant them into boarding schools and live with "the families of farmers or artisans where they may learn the trades and home habits of their employers."³² While this method of separating

²⁸ The New York Times, "The Chinese Educational Mission," *New York Times* (New York), August 18, 1873, [Page #], accessed February 20, 2017, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9904EFDC1239EF34BC4052DFBE668388669FDE&legacy=true>.

²⁹ Chung, "Reminiscences of a Pioneer," in *Chinese American*, 34.

³⁰ Edward J. M Rhoads, *Stepping Forth into the World: The Chinese Educational Mission to the United States, 1872-81* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 136.

³¹ Michael R. Godley, "The End of the Queue: Hair as Symbol in Chinese History," *China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 27 (September 27, 2011): 1, accessed February 25, 2017, http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=027_queue.inc&issue=027.

³² Lake Mohonk Conferences of Friends of the Indian, "Program of the Lake Mohonk Conference," 1884, in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, by Francis Paul Prucha, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 164.

children from their families appeared to be for more effective education, it highlights America's decided necessity to imbue Native children with American culture. The government advertised that the separation would help Natives to learn English to conduct business and join America's workforce,³³ but with an additional focus on the "home habits" of the American people, it seemed that making mainstream America's culture their culture was the real goal. By not having the schools on the reservation, students would have no one to remind them of their traditions. As one student described, at the schools they would wear "white man's clothes and [eat] white man's food and [go] to white man's churches," and when they left school they would come home and "say Indians were bad [and laugh] at [their] people and their ... sacred societies and dances."³⁴ To make Native American children forget their culture was a goal for the United States and it was accomplished. Like the Chinese, Native Americans were inundated with American culture, and while this culture was not welcomed it achieved the same effect of having the students accept white America's beliefs as their own.

Additionally, the requirement to not speak their native languages while living at the boarding schools efficiently destroyed both their familial connection and a large portion of their understanding of their culture. America saw that "the language [English] will enable him to transact his business understandingly with his white neighbors."³⁵ English seemed to be the remaining key to fully absorbing Native children into America. In learning English, Native people could finally fulfill the goal of being a part of the Nation, but as this was a priority the decidedly most efficient way to achieve this was to forbid all indigenous languages. This desire for English turned into a prohibition of native languages altogether even in private conversations or prayers, causing many to forget how to speak their ancestral language.³⁶ By losing their language the young students also lost their connection to their past; if they could not even think in a voice that was not tainted by America's influence then there was a shrinking possibility that they could remain fully Native. Not even being able to speak to people such as their grandparents blocked many students from fully returning when they came back to the reservation.³⁷ Without their native languages, a barrier was created between them and their families on the reservation bolstering the in-reservation perception that the returned students were

³³ Luther Standing Bear, "Luther Standing," in *Major Problems*, 378.

³⁴ Sun Elk, "He Is Not One of Us," 1883, in *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-white Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492-2000*, ed. Peter Nabokov, rev. ed. (New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 1999), 222.

³⁵ (157, Annual Report, Documents)

³⁶ Churchill, *Kill the Indian*, 22.

³⁷ Sun Elk, "He Is Not One of Us," in *Native American*, 223.

no longer Native. Because indigenous languages held cultural, religious, and familial significance, eliminating access to that knowledge Native students were left stranded between two cultures with no ability to fully return to their former one.

For the students in the Chinese Educational Mission, the emphasis on learning English supplanted their ability to speak Chinese, thus pulling away their National pride in China and cutting off their connection with their homeland. Because of their youth, the Chinese students were seen as the perfect candidates to balance Chinese studies – a life requirement in efforts to keep the cultural traditions of a Chinese citizen alive – while fully absorbing the English language to learn American technological secrets.³⁸ However, being cut off from China and living in an environment that functioned solely on the desire to learn English, students were put in a position where their Chinese language could easily slip away. A student noted, “As their knowledge of English increased, their Chinese suffered in consequence ... before long, the Chinese words were one by one supplanted by English ones and finally were practically banished from the daily speech of the boys.”³⁹ Much like Wing in years previous, English was pushing out the Chinese part of their lives. Their value was not from their Chinese; it was from their ability to learn English. Furthermore, this loss of language was not just about a loss in conversational skills but hinted at the student’s growing divide between themselves and China. In a commentary by a Chinese official, Ts’ai Kuo-yin, he states that “the boys long contaminated by foreign habits have despised Chinese learning and forgotten that they are Chinese” and on their return were “simply many more foreigners in [China’s] midst.”⁴⁰ Akin to Native Americans, because of English these Chinese students were caught between two linguistic worlds for the advertised purpose of business. While not punished for speaking Chinese, the environment that devalued their native tongue pushed out that portion of their culture. No longer were they a Chinese group in America to learn Western secrets but had changed into American-loving students who occasionally spoke Chinese.

While it was advertised as a step toward a stronger China, the similarities between the Chinese Education Mission and boarding schools built to eradicate Native American culture demonstrate how these two movements had the same desire but in different

³⁸ CEM Connections, “Living and Learning,” cemconnections.org.

³⁹ Rhoads, *Stepping Forth*, 158.

⁴⁰ William Hung, “Huang Tsun-Hsien’s Poem ‘The Closure of The Educational Mission in America,’” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 18, no. 1/2 (1955): 71, doi:10.2307/2718411.

circumstances. Later because the Native American educational movement was more blatant in its motivations to eradicate culture that allowed for more brutal conditions. This forced America to eventually accept some of its failures and attempt to remediate the damages caused by the Indian Reservation Act of 1934.⁴¹ On the other hand, China's self-strengthening movement was never accepted as having negative effects on China. Upon the movement's closure in 1881 over protestations of being Americanized, the movement distributed most students into government positions to advise the rest of the self-strengthening movement and was eventually moved to higher positions in the government.⁴² Not only were American-centric students in positions of power, being its first major movement to modernize, but the Chinese Educational Mission also defined China's relationship with America. By internalizing American ideologies, China defined itself as inferior to America to the Native Americans. But without acknowledging the problem there was no subsequent remediation. China could have created a strong self-strengthening movement that stuck to its principles to protect its country, but in the end, opted for the role of the inferior to improve. Undeniably China improved from the knowledge that was gained by the students, but in the end, welcomed suffering that trapped them under America for the following centuries.

⁴¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, ed., "Indian Reorganization Act," Encyclopaedia Bri, last modified July 20, 1998, accessed February 26, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indian-Reorganization-Act>.

⁴² Edward J. M Rhoads, *Stepping Forth into the World: The Chinese Educational Mission to the United States, 1872-81* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 203.

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The Cycle of Violence in *Native Son*

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Question

Prevalent systematic racism presents a twofold problem for those oppressed or discriminated against. The harm caused by racism is both psychological and physical. To fully understand the effects of racism, therefore, we must ask how the psychological and physical components of racism reinforce and interact with one another. In *Native Son*, how does Richard Wright deal with these two veins of racism in the experiences of his protagonist, Bigger Thomas?

Richard Wright's *Native Son* tells the tale of Bigger Thomas: a poor, alienated 20-year-old Black male who struggles to attach meaning to his life in a racist, segregated 1930s South Side Chicago. Published in 1940, with over 215,000 copies sold in the first three weeks of its release, it was evident that "the day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever."¹ Yet, despite universal acknowledgment of *Native Son*'s influence in American culture, specifically its impact on canonical Black literary fiction, the sheer amount of violence seen in *Native Son* has drawn significant attention. Some critics have asserted that the brutal, excessive images of violence, especially those towards women, should be read as "undeniable evidence of the misogyny underlying Wright's work," sabotaging Wright's fundamental goal of convincing his largely white audience to unite in an "interracial class revolution."² Other critics, like prominent African-American poet and activist June Jordan, have affirmed the violence in *Native Son* – especially Bigger's – as a symbol of

¹ Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent*, Fall 1963, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/howe-blackboys.html>.

² Sondra Guttman, "What Bigger Killed For: Re-reading Violence against Women in *Native Son*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 169, doi:10.1353/tsl.2001.0008.

Black “liberation into human community.”³ However, rather than just bracketing the trope of violence in Wright’s work as a part of these monolithic contrasting views, this essay focuses on unraveling the novel’s undercurrents by delving into how violence manifests itself in the plot. Through the course of this discussion, the argument presented here also unravels the various forms of violence that come into play in Wright’s work, and the backdrop of the split and fractured identity of Bigger Thomas against which they function. This process focuses specifically on how violence is brought to life through two main layers: physical and psychological. While the former deals only with the aspect of bodily harm, the latter plays itself out in the intangible domain of attitudes and words that appear unremarkable at first look but reflect the thick layer of continuous assault that engulfs socially disadvantaged people such as the protagonist. Strongly intertwined, these two layers exist in a constant state of interaction such that they fuel each other’s birth and subsequent solidification, not only piercing the lives of Wright’s characters but also helping Wright establish a clear framework for viewing his critique of American racism.

To fully examine the trope of violence as it operates in Wright’s work, it is essential to comprehend the ideological, social, and cultural impulses that subliminally shape the character of Bigger Thomas. Legendary African American intellectual James Baldwin has offered one of the most powerful readings of Bigger’s character. He has, quite uninhibitedly, denounced Wright for portraying a character who is not only disproportionately inclined to physical violence perpetrated against Black people, but who also practices a strong divorcement from Black cultural traditions, thereby reinforcing the notion that “there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse” in Black social life and Black survival in white America.⁴ This can be traced back to the trial when Reverend Hammond attempts to enter Bigger’s jail cell to console Bigger. Bigger rejects Reverend Hammond’s benevolence immediately, threatening to “kill” the Reverend as he slams “the steel bars” shut in such a way that “it smashe[s] the old Black preacher squarely in the face, sending him reeling backward upon the concrete.”⁵ By refusing to engage with Reverend Hammond, Bigger isolates himself from Black theology in its entirety and crushes all possibility of aligning himself with the politics of hope that might come to his rescue. Wright makes it clear that “never again did [Bigger] want to feel anything like hope.”⁶ Bigger’s rejection of the Black Reverend

³ June Jordan, *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 48.

⁴ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, ©1984, ©1955.), 36.

⁵ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 339.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 340.

Hammond and his simultaneous refusal to engage in the historically rich Black cultural tradition of the Black church lies at the heart of Baldwin's criticism: Wright has failed to accurately portray Black liberation strategies and Black American rituals. The "hysterically" violent Bigger seen in the scene with Reverend Hammond makes his "body [seem like] a flaming cross", which resembles the "cross of the Ku Klux Klan" that is seen outside Bigger's trial only a page prior.^{7,8} Here, Bigger's fatalism and resignation to "the American image of the Negro" – or what racist white Americans think of Blacks – also falls into the list of Baldwin's critiques as Bigger accepts a "life that has no other possible reality."⁹ In other words, Bigger's actions and subsequent embrace of those actions validate the expectations of 1930s white America.

Other critics have reverberated a similar sentiment to Baldwin's about violence in *Native Son*, determining that Wright's project is "unconcerned with the question of Black subjectivity."¹⁰ According to them, Bigger's extensive catalog of violence towards his most intimate fellow Black counterparts, such as Gus and Bessie, "equate blackness with limitation, terror and submission."¹¹ Perhaps the most accessible case for these critics is Bigger's treatment of Bessie. Throughout *Native Son*, Bigger consistently manipulates Bessie, treating her as nothing more than a sex object. He only visits her "to hide his growing and deepening feeling of hysteria."¹² Inept and incapable of negotiating his social position in society, he turns to Bessie as his only source of validation and approval. When she becomes a "dangerous burden" in his escape from the police, however, he decides to "settle things with [Bessie]."¹³ This results in him raping her and bringing a brick down on her head "again and again" to the point where he is simply "striking a wet wad of cotton."¹⁴ This visceral, graphic scene of Bigger as his most abominable self – deceiving her, raping her, and beating her to death – seems to associate Black masculinity with terror and violence, confining it to a deplorable trait that constantly seeks to feel superior and seize control in a world where it is perpetually devoid of authority. Bigger's later disposal of Bessie's body into an air draft symbolizes his dismissal of both a "stifling home life and the possibility of a more fulfilling domesticity

⁷ Ibid., 339.

⁸ Ibid., 338.

⁹ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native*, 338.

¹⁰ Kadeshia L. Matthews, "Black Boy No More?: Violence and the Flight from Blackness in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 277, doi:10.1353/mfs.2014.0016.

¹¹ Ibid., 277.

¹² Wright, *Native Son*, 28.

¹³ Ibid., 229.

¹⁴ Ibid., 237.

with Bessie.”¹⁵ Just as Bigger’s violent actions against Bessie conflate Black masculinity with violence, anti-Wright critics can easily read Wright’s depiction of Bessie as both misogynistic and parasitic to a strong, non-submissive Black female identity. In the end, Bessie’s “sigh of resignation” reflects her general disposition, which results in her submitting herself to Bigger despite his consistent maltreatment of her.¹⁶ Ultimately, she commits violence against herself by “get[ting] drunk to forget [or] to sleep.”¹⁷

This simplistic, violent, and fragmented representation of Black interiority is not only confined to major events but it can also be traced throughout the incidents of startling violence that appear in *Native Son*. For instance, when Gus exposes Bigger’s fear of robbing a white store in front of the other Black men in the pool club, Bigger’s immediate reaction is to become hostile. He accuses Gus of being “yellow,” and turns to acts of violence in his head against Gus: “He could stab Gus[,]he could slap him[,] he could kick him [, or] he could trip Gus up.”¹⁸ Bigger’s assault on Gus completely overpowers and undermines the “brotherhood” and intimate friendship between urban Black males. The prior scene depicts an act of bonding between Bigger and Gus in which they “play white” together and metaphorically challenge the “vast white world that sprawl[s] and tower[s] in the sun before them.”¹⁹ This criticism of Wright carries the assumption that these supposedly strong Black male relationships are vital in challenging the pervasiveness of white supremacy and the “vast white world”; Wright’s protagonist embodies the illegitimacy of that popular concept. Lastly, critics are quick to point out parallels between Bigger’s rape of Bessie and his later attempts to sexualize his violence against Gus. After the fight between them, Bigger “forc[es] [Gus] to lick the phallic knife” to signify his masculinity and dominance over him, which only reaffirms “the sexual paranoia” of whites.^{20,21} These behavioral glitches of Bigger give way to what Baldwin and others may call a “gratuitous and compulsive” display of violence by Wright.²² They are inherently brutal and layered with an

¹⁵ Matthews, “Black Boy No More?,” 283.

¹⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 223.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰ Masaya Takeuchi, “Bigger’s Divided Self: Violence and Homosociality in *Native Son*,” *Studies in American Naturalism* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 59, doi:10.1353/san.0.0004.

²¹ James Baldwin, “Alas, Poor Richard,” 1961, in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s/Marek, 1985), 273.

²² *Ibid.*, 273.

extra coating of obscenity that resonates throughout the novel and leaves behind an impression of horror and disgust in the readers' minds.

Readers can only assess these starkly barbaric acts of violence committed by Bigger for their actual emotional impact when juxtaposing them with the psychological complexities embroiling them throughout the novel. At the crux of this proposition lies the idea that Bigger is not *just* a “monster created by the American republic” as characterized by Baldwin.²³ He is a “black man striking out against the boundaries of racism” and “a man living a key modern experience.”²⁴ When Bigger “play[s] ‘white’” with Gus, a scene in which they “imitate the ways and manners of white folks”, Bigger demonstrates his dreams of being a pilot, a general, and even a president. He goes to the movies since “in a movie he could dream without effort.”^{25,26} During the film about the Daltons with Gus, he becomes infatuated with Mary because her real beauty comes with the status and wealth she occupies, which Bigger can never obtain. In the hope of materializing his fantasies through Mary, he accepts the job at the Daltons, trying to recall, “a story of a Negro chauffeur who had married a rich white girl,” and wishes Mary Dalton “would give him money.”²⁷ While Bigger’s dream is extraordinarily naïve and implausible, the very fact that he dreams illustrates a child-like innocence within him, showing that he is far more complex than just a “demented savage” characterized by Buckey.²⁸ Like most American men of the 1930s, Bigger is motivated by power, wealth, and sex, but his status as an African-American man in the 1930s puts these goals potentially out of his reach. It is this divide, a sort of chasm between what Bigger wants and what he is allowed to have, that tears him apart, rendering him hostile, disoriented, and impulsive. In the end, he admits to Gus the cold truth: “[He is] black and they white [and] they got things and [he] ain’t.”²⁹

Given Bigger’s inner psychological torment, the physical violence he commits, especially against Blacks, is symptomatic of his environment. At the beginning of the story, the “huge black rat” that invades Thomas’ apartment and terrorizes Bigger’s mother and sister is emblematic of the structural violence that imposingly represses Black

²³ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native*, 35.

²⁴ Jerry H. Bryant, “The Violence of Native Son,” *The Southern Review* 17, no. 2 (April 1, 1981): 308.

²⁵ Wright, *Native Son*, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 414.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

social life in Chicago and thrusts Bigger to spiral out of control.³⁰ After all, Bigger's response to the rat's intrusion is aggressive, impulsive, and vicious. Bigger "t[akes] a shoe and pound[s] the rat's head, crushing it and cursing hysterically [,] 'you *sonofabitch*.'"³¹ He then "approaches [s] [Vera, his sister,] with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister's fear."³² The violence in this scene is symbolic of the constricted ideological paradigms of structural violence that Bigger has experienced. The fact that he does not even try to think of any other plausible solutions to drive the rat away highlights a sense of psychological and mental disorientation, resulting from subjection to years of violence inflicted on his selfhood by society. It is not so much his inability to think that drives him to violence, but rather his belief that it is the only mode of action that will allow him to fix the situation. Bigger's nature is also reflected by the motion of the "pendulum" that portends the type of violent mental oscillations he goes through throughout the novel: choosing Bessie over Mary, his unstable relationship with Gus, or simply his hostile behavior towards anyone who seeks to help and comfort him. Desperate to seek autonomy, these acts of physical violence are very significant in helping the audience realize how Bigger is a perpetrator of the crime, yet is also a hapless victim of the many crushing layers of structural violence heaped upon his inner self for years.

Wright's achievement as a writer, however, lies in his ability to reflect upon the physical suffering that Bigger and his family experience from poverty as well as the immaterial suffering. He explores the psychological violence that tears apart Bigger's moral compass and propels him to commit some of the most heinous crimes on a mere whim to regulate the situation. This becomes apparent when Bigger tries to terrorize and establish dominance over the women in his family to prevent facing the truth: "He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them."³³ These acts are an aching attempt to rescue himself – a self that he feels is always crushed under the burden of being Black. His effort to maintain this calm demeanor, therefore, is deeply reflective of his ambivalent and conflicting mental state. It shows a burning desire to keep himself together and in control. He continues to play submissive and feeble in certain situations even when this behavior is counterproductive to his desire to gain greater agency. In other words, as Bigger struggles to "balance his submissive self, which is thoroughly conditioned by whites,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10.

by asserting control over others”, he finds harassing his mother and sister, emasculating Gus, and violently sexually assaulting Bessie, as platforms to release his tension and purge his mind of debilitating inferiority.³⁴

What is even more noteworthy here is that Bigger’s capacity to enact violence against Blacks rests on his understanding that Black bodies are expendable in American society and white bodies are not. He does claim victims from both of the communities, however, in the case of the latter, he always feels crippled by an extra arresting fear of drawing “the full wrath of an alien white world.”³⁵ Bigger even acknowledges that the “fear of robbing a white man had hold of him when he started [a] fight with Gus.”³⁶ Bigger rationalizes that “it was much easier and safer to rob [his] own people,” but robbing Blum’s store “would be a violation of the ultimate taboo.”³⁷ Additionally, Bigger’s belief that “white people never searched for Negroes who killed other Negroes” enables him to rape and kill Bessie as he “feels no one is watching.”^{38,39} The cold imagery in the “quiet and cold room” during Bessie’s rape contrasts with the warm, fiery imagery during Mary’s death, suggesting that Bessie’s actual rape, in contrast to Mary’s metaphorical rape, will be “literally frozen out of the story.”^{40,41} Later, during Bigger’s trial, the prosecutor brings Bessie’s body as “evidence” to make sure Bigger is punished for “the death [and rape] of a white girl.”⁴² While this might be read as underlining misogyny in Wright’s work, it is a true representation of how Black subjectivity has always existed at the margins and in the shadows. Wright, in this instance, emerges as an author who seeks to “tell the truth as [he] [sees] it and [feels] it.”⁴³

Bigger’s intense and passionate fear of the white hegemony is so crippling that it pushes him to make senseless and reckless decisions when interacting with whites. For Bigger, “white people [are] not really people; they [are] a sort of a great natural force like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s

³⁴ Takeuchi, “Bigger’s Divided Self,” 63.

³⁵ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998), 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 331.

³⁹ Guttman, “What Bigger,” 184.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Native Son*, 237.

⁴¹ Guttman, “What Bigger,” 185.

⁴² Wright, *Native Son*, 331.

⁴³ Richard Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” 1940, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son: A Collection of Critical Essays*, by Houston A. Baker (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 43.

feet.”⁴⁴ They are a terrorizing and dominating presence in his life. Unlike the violence he commits against Blacks, his violence against whites is reactionary and “out of desperation for safety.”⁴⁵ Bigger is acutely aware of not “go[ing] beyond the certain limits” to test the “white force.”⁴⁶ Bigger rejects Mary’s and Jan’s cordiality; their attempt to establish an authentic relationship with him fails. Moreover, it is their acknowledgment of Bigger and the “human[ity]” of the other “twelve million [negros]” that threatens and irritates Bigger.⁴⁷ Instead of being comforted by this hand of empathy, he feels agitated at being trapped in this overarching identity of a “negro.” He doesn’t wish to seek a connection with them; liberty is his goal as he hopes to “stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out – with himself and them in it.”⁴⁸ Even though he is not caught in a disorienting and deadlocked situation, like he is when Mrs. Dalton walks in on him in the same room with Mary, Bigger continues to be a victim of a split interiority that forces him to look at all whiteness around him as a threat he needs to deal with. His frustration and seething anger at this point stem not from an act of open discrimination against him, but from his inability to vent his anger on Jan and Mary in the way that he could do if they were part of the Black community. Mary’s and Jan’s extreme kindness towards him further wounds his already shattered self, reminding him of an identity that he forever feels incapacitated by. Mary is “a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do.”⁴⁹ Given his previous distrust in the horrors and powers of the “white force” and what he is conditioned to believe about whites in general, Jan’s and Mary’s compassion cross into a “No Man’s Land”; he cannot assert his aggressive side because they are white, and he does not like the idea of donning the role of a passive servant when Jan tells him to not “say *sir* to [him].”^{50,51} Such interactions, therefore, further fracture him and render him entirely vulnerable, making him feel “naked [and] transparent.”⁵² Regardless of Mary’s and Jan’s true intentions, Bigger interprets their efforts to be his equal as patronizing and demeaning. Mary’s intentions are naïve and not malicious as she expresses the desire to “see how [Bigger’s] people live.”⁵³ Yet Bigger’s dismal attitude, facilitated by the racist ethos of the 1930s, makes his outlook so insular

⁴⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 114.

⁴⁵ Bryant, “The Violence,” 305.

⁴⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 114.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 79.

that he rejects even the most plausible and optimistic options that are offered to him in the form of a potentially warm friendship.

As a result of this bitterness, Bigger's acts of violence are characterized by the physical damage that he causes to his victims as well as the more symbolic fight against systemic oppression. Devoid of an ethical foreground and overcome by antagonism, he finds himself unable to love even when given a chance to do so. As Robert James notes, Bigger's "drives toward love have been ensnarled with his impulses toward hate" such that his attempt to engage in "romantic love [with Mary] gets displayed by his desire to destroy people with violence triggered by environmental pressures."⁵⁴ Despite Bigger's misogyny and compulsion for assaulting women (seen in his treatment of the female members of his family and later Bessie), Bigger desires consensual sex with Mary, as he knows she is still a white woman. Before Mrs. Dalton comes in the room, the lovemaking between both of them is consensual with "his lips pressed tightly against her," and her reciprocation through the "veritable grind" of "her hips."⁵⁵ However, once Mrs. Dalton walks in and Bigger tries to keep Mary quiet with a pillow, the lovemaking occurring minutes beforehand becomes indistinguishable from rape. Mary "trie[s] to rise" as he "[holds] his hand over her mouth" and with "Mary's body surg[ing] upward [as] he pushe[s] downward" using "all his weight."⁵⁶ Despite the "frenzy [that] dominated [Bigger]", it is Mrs. Dalton's embodiment of the "white force" that scares him and forces him to act in this flustered manner, as if trying to escape a looming threat.⁵⁷ The intertwining themes of politics and sexual desires in *Native Son*, with Mary representing both wealth and sex, are also seen here. The lovemaking is intentionally written with strong undertones of violence to depict Bigger's attempt to negotiate his restricted social status through a white woman. The fact that this lovemaking ends in Mary's violent death shows that Bigger can never succeed in white America as he is confronted with the sad truth that "he committed rape every time he looked into a white face."⁵⁸ The portrayal of Mary's murder is "replete with sexual imagery and sexual tension", forcing the audience to conclude that Bigger's interactions with the white world, by his misbalanced mental state and destabilized interiority, will always assume a violent and destructive form.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Robert James Butler, "The Function of Violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Black American Literature Forum* 20 20, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 1986): 14, doi:10.2307/2904549.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Native Son*, 84.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁹ Guttman, "What Bigger," 179.

It is these frequent violent interactions, along with their sheer excessiveness, that compels audiences to recognize the horrors of American racism and its effect on Bigger. Wright does not stop with the “mild scene” where “Bigger smothers Mary with her pillow[;] he must resort to greater horror” for a greater and resounding emotional impact on the readers.⁶⁰ To ensure his success, Wright creates a string of horrible images by describing one of the most graphic and pivotal moments of the book: Bigger’s disposal of Mary’s body which includes the beheading and burning of her corpse. Wright amplifies the emotional impact of the scene through intense and vivid imagery; the well-defined image of the “curly black hair” drenched in the “circles of pink” blood on the white newspaper naturally embeds itself in the minds of the reader.⁶¹ The red coals that “blazed and quivered with molten fury” are described such as to illustrate “the sexual nature of Bigger’s violence even if Bigger himself forgets it.”^{62,63} Some critics have interpreted Bigger believing he “*bad*” to decapitate Mary, in conjunction with the blazing furnace that “melodramatically evok[es] the fires of hell,” as “Bigger emerge[ing] newly born.”^{64,65} He moves closer to a new, more self-determined Black identity to an extent that “his violence creates him as an American man just as revolution created the Founding Fathers.”⁶⁶ However, the cost of crafting this new self is too huge and too destructive, for it leaves Bigger “hysterical” and makes him want to “run from the basement” and “go as far as possible” from Mary’s body.⁶⁷ Bigger’s inability to reconcile this new dimension of his selfhood illustrates how victimized and inherently torn he truly is and how he can never re-emerge as “newly born.”

While it is easy to notice the dominance of violence within Wright’s work, it is imperative to plant that “excessive violence” within the societal framework that engenders violence in the first place. In *How Bigger Was Born*, Wright establishes that he intended to make *Native Son* “so hard and deep that [people] would have to face it without the consolation of tears.”⁶⁸ With the exploration of both the physical and

⁶⁰ Bryant, “The Violence,” 305.

⁶¹ Wright, *Native Son*, 92.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶³ Guttman, “What Bigger,” 180.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 92.

⁶⁵ Bryant, “The Violence,” 305.

⁶⁶ Kadeshia L. Matthews, “Black Boy No More?: Violence and the Flight from Blackness in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 281, doi:10.1353/mfs.2014.0016.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 92.

⁶⁸ Wright, “How ‘Bigger’” in *Twentieth Century*, 40.

psychological aspects of racism, Wright forces his readers to think about the existence, significance, and position of the warped interiorities that white America creates yet is unable to handle. Inept at dealing with her self-created demons, America's preferred method is to kill the demons that she created and dispose of them. For example, Bigger is sent off to the electric chair, but not without the public crowding and harassing Bigger's mother, referring to her son as the "black ape" that needs to be lynched or "burn[ed]" alive.⁶⁹ Hence, Bigger is always perceived as the violent "[n-word] that killed Miss Mary", and not the victimized, conflicted man he truly is, and as such racial tensions will only continue to mount.⁷⁰ The "brrrrrrrrriiiiiiiiiinnnnnnng" of the alarm clock on the first page of *Native Son* was Wright's call in the 1930s for America to wake up and confront the realities of systematic racism. Almost a century later, Wright's message is still applicable as systematic racism continues to persist in the form of mass incarceration, police brutality, and poverty. So, when will America wake up?

⁶⁹ Wright, *Native Son*, 334.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 334.

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