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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

“The Drama of Determinism”: The Evolution of Naturalism in Fiction and Social Thought

Dissertation

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Nathan Dean Allison

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Michael Szalay, Co-Chair
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2023

DEDICATION

To

Catie,

My World.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Texts, as literary naturalists would let us know, are inseparable from the contexts in which they are produced. And, while this recognition causes varying degrees of anxiety for the authors under discussion in this dissertation, for this writer, that recognition is a source of great comfort as contexts reveal that we never write in isolation, that our work, whether it is ever read by anyone, is necessarily connected to the world in myriad ways. Context means that we always write in a community of others. I am grateful to all the communities that have made this dissertation possible.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“The Drama of Determinism”: The Evolution of Naturalism in Fiction and Social Thought

by

Nathan Dean Allison

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Michael Szalay, Irvine, Co-Chair

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While the discourses of the physical and social sciences gave literary naturalists a useful framework for understanding the world (how environments determined human action), those same discourses ended up calling into question the freedom—and thus the value—of artists who were themselves understood to be determined by natural and social forces. How, over time, literary naturalists frame and navigate both this issue and the larger issue of the relationship between the aesthetic and determinism furnishes the subject matter for this dissertation.

INTRODUCTION

“The Drama of Determinism”: The Evolution of Naturalism in Fiction and Social Thought

A like determinism will govern the stones of the roadway and the brain of man. Émile Zola, “The Experimental Novel”

It is quite possible to make a novelist, and a good one, too . . . provided you . . . are willing to wait long enough.
Frank Norris, “The Responsibilities of the Novelist”

Why should I not, like a scientist in a laboratory, use my imagination and invent test-tube situations, place Thomas in them, and, following the guidance of my own hopes and fears, what I had learned and remembered, work out in fictional form an emotional statement and resolution of this problem?
Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing”

How will the assumption that man has free will make someone a better writer?
James T. Farrell, “Some Observations on Naturalism, So Called, in Fiction”

NATURALISM AND “THE LARGER VIEW”

At the end of Frank Norris’s *The Octopus: A Story of California*, we find the poet, Presley, reckoning with the violence he has witnessed in the San Joaquin Valley:

The [railroad] had killed Harran, had killed Osterman, had killed Broderson, had killed Hooven. It had beggared Magnus and had driven him to a state of semi-insanity after he had wrecked his honour [*sic*] in the vain attempt to do evil that good might come. It had enticed Lyman into its toils to pluck from him his manhood and his honesty, corrupting him and poisoning him beyond redemption; it had hounded Dyke from his legitimate employment and had made of him a highwayman and criminal. It had cast forth Mrs. Hooven to starve to death upon the City streets. It had driven Minna to prostitution. It had slain Annixter at the very moment when painfully and manfully he had at last achieved his own salvation and stood forth resolved to do right, to act unselfishly and to live for others. It had widowed Hilma in the very dawn of her happiness. It had killed the very babe within the mother’s womb, strangling life ere yet it had been born. (650-51)

Trying to make sense of all that he had witnessed, Presley remembers the parting words of the ranchhand and shepherd, Vanamee: “Never judge of the whole round of life by the mere segment

you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect” (635). In the face of all of this violence, Presley finds this “larger view” (“what contributed the greatest good to the greatest numbers”) compelling (651):

Yes, good issued from this crisis, untouched, unassailable, undefiled . . . the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. (651-52)

Presley comes to terms with tragedy by focusing not on “the mere segment of life” he “can see” (death, “crisis,” “the individual”), but on “the larger view” (“all things,” “the [human] race,” the evolution of “the whole,” the relation between the relationship between the “segment” and “the whole,”). While this passage trades in the language of theology (in an attempt to reckon with ‘the problem of evil’), it is a more general rejection of “the mere segment” of “life” he “can see” and the adoption of this “larger view.” With this “larger view,” Presley is able to reconcile two seemingly contrary things: the fate of “the individual” ends in death while “the whole . . . inevitably, resistlessly work[s] together for good.” The passage even goes so far as to suggest that the former is justified by the latter.

But, for Presley to reconcile these contraries, he must (1) accept that there is a “whole” to begin with and (2) insist on a necessary relation between the parts (“the mere segment” of life) and the whole in which “the whole” has a character that cannot be reduced to its parts. Instead, the character of the whole is an emergent property that arises from the relation of those parts. Importantly, this is not Presley’s initial response to the violence he has witnessed (how could it be?); rather, this is a view he has learned to make sense of a quickly changing world in which human life seems increasingly dominated by natural and social ‘forces.’

While this moment marks Presley's adoption of this "larger view" (characterized by a focus on systems made up of organic relations) as a character, because Presley is the novel's stand-in for the author of literary naturalist texts, this moment also marks the adoption of and formal articulation of that view in American literary naturalism. Just as Presley does not initially interpret the events he witnesses in the novel from this "larger view" but instead learns that view from others, so, too, does classic literary naturalism adopt and adapt a framework beyond "the mere segment" of "life" you could "see" (the particulars). That framework, for American Literary naturalism, can be traced to French literary naturalism and the discourses (biology and sociology) on which it is based.

LITERARY NATURALISM'S FIRST PRINCIPLES: (1) SCIENTIFIC REASON

In "The Experimental Novel," Émile Zola outlines the founding principles of literary naturalism; he writes:

We have experimental chemistry and medicine; we shall have an experimental physiology, and later on an experimental novel. It is an inevitable evolution, the goal of which it is easy to see today. All things hang together; it is necessary to start from the determinism of inanimate bodies in order to arrive at the determinism of living beings; and since savants like Claude Bernard demonstrate now that fixed laws govern the human body, we can easily proclaim, without fear of being mistaken, the hour in which the laws of thought and passion will be formulated in their turn. A like determinism will govern the stones of the roadway and the brain of man. . . . the application of the experimental method to the novel and to the drama. The return to nature, the naturalistic evolution which marks the century, drives little by little all the manifestation of human intelligence into the same scientific path. (8, 10)

Zola's first principle is that the "evolution" in fiction known as literary naturalism is based on scientific reason; a "return to nature" (by which he means a returned attention to nature rather than rejection of the social) would allow "all the manifestation of human intelligence" to be placed "into the same scientific path": "Study men as simple elements and note the reactions" (qtd. in Rahv 62). To "study men" in this way would literary naturalists "to possess a knowledge

of the mechanism of the phenomena inherent in man, to show the machinery of his intellectual and sensory manifestations, under the influences of heredity and environment” (“The Experimental Novel” 10). Richard Lehan notes, “Literary naturalism derives mainly from a biological model,” especially during the early stages¹ (“The European Background” 47). For Zola and the French school of literary naturalism, biological systems (which were themselves understood to be the result of conflicts between “heredity and environment”) materially determined the human (Lehan 47). This idea often appears in classic texts of American literary naturalism, but such an account, as we will see, is, from the first, married with a focus on social determinants of action. Scientific principles, for Zola, would be used not only to understand the “fixed laws” that “govern” the human body but to transform “the novel and . . . the drama.”

LITERARY NATURALISM’S FIRST PRINCIPLES: (2) SYNTHETIC THOUGHT

Zola’s second principle is that literary naturalism is, in the philosophical sense, synthetic. Naturalism is then premised on the act of integration: bringing together one discipline (the sciences) with another (literature), language with matter, together word with world. When “all the manifestation of human intelligence” are placed “into the same scientific path,” the “evolution” from “experimental chemistry and medicine” to “experimental physiology” to the “experimental novel,” would in Zola’s words, be “inevitable.” All the literary naturalist need do, like Presley adopting a framework to make sense of the world, is apply the principles of science to the novel. Literary naturalism thus self-consciously prides itself on *not* being autonomous from other spheres of life or other disciplines. Depending on the writer and depending on literary naturalism’s particular stage of development, these disciplines range from biology to physics to sociology to philosophy.

¹ For more on the transformation of literary naturalism from the French to American varieties, see Lehan’s “The European Background” in the *Cambridge Companion to Naturalism*.

Literary naturalism brings these varied disciplines together and reconciles them in literary form; in this way, literary naturalists position their work as inherently relational, in part, because they see themselves as rejecting a view of the literature as impractical and unrelated to the concerns of everyday life.² Zola and others suggest that the application of scientific principles would allow us “to solve scientifically the question of how men behave when they are in society” (10) For Jennifer Fleissner, naturalism marks the “introduction into history of natural forces” (2) “‘nature;’ newly fashioned into an ‘ism,’ a category reconceived as part of social life” (6). Unlike, say, the classic pastoral, naturalism is an attempt to understand the ways in which nature is an important category for analysis *in* society and everyday life rather than somehow outside of it. The natural and the social, for literary naturalists, are thus mutually constitutive of one another.

LITERARY NATURALISM’S FIRST PRINCIPLES: (3) ECOLOGY AND ORGANICISM

Zola’s third principle (“All things hang together”) is that literary naturalism is ecological and therefore relies on organicist thought.³ This principle relies on, what Northop Frye, in another context, would call, “the assumption of total coherence” (17). To say, “All things are connected,” is to insist on (1) the existence of a system in which seemingly unlike and unrelated phenomena are connected and (2) on a set of principles (“fixed laws”) that make up this system. There is, further, a necessary relationship between the part and the whole, between one organism and another, between an organism and its environment, and between a particular phenomenon (e.g. *The Octopus*) and the category or type the phenomenon represents (e.g. literary naturalism).

² For Zola, the ultimate goal of writing is not to gain understanding but to make use that understanding to render the social environment more conducive to human flourishing.

³ Organicism, as I am using it here, does not mean wholly unconstructed (as in naturalization of this or that difference). Rather, such terms are defined relationally.

The ecological and organicist quality of naturalism requires a dual focus: not simply on the “mere segment” of “life” or “the whole,” but on their relation; this is the “larger view” Presley learns to adopt.

In naturalist texts, the emphasis on “the larger view” (the organicist and ecological character of naturalism) manifests a few different ways. First, naturalist texts exhibit a tendency to give an account of everything in its world in narratorial editorializing that explicitly spells out various relations; this moment in *The Octopus* is fairly typical of the genre:

The offices of the ranches were thus connected by wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool. Fluctuations in the price of the world’s crop during and after the harvest thrilled straight to the office of Los Muertos, to that of the Quien Sabe, to Osterman’s, and to Broderson’s. During a flurry in the Chicago wheat pits in the August of that year, which had affected even the San Francisco market, Harran and Magnus had sat up nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel. At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains of India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine. (54)

As the passage makes abundantly clear, the events we witness in the San Joaquin Valley, where the majority of the novel takes place, are determined by relations that exceed it. The ranch is less a discrete space than a register of these relations: “part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant.” Second, naturalist texts continually oscillate between character and environment (with the latter exhibiting a great influence on the former). The narrator of *Sister Carrie* describes Chicago as “a giant magnet, drawing to itself, from all quarters, the hopeful and the hopeless—those who had their fortune yet to make and those whose fortunes and affairs had reached a disastrous climax elsewhere” (16). The city is the magnet that draws Carrie to it. In

Native Son, Bigger Thomas, is similarly described as “conditioned in a cramped environment,” that of the South Side of segregated Chicago (240). What looks like character choice from one angle (that of the “mere segment” of “life” in isolation) is from the “larger view” (that takes into account the relation between the individual and the environment) the result of necessity.

LITERARY NATURALISM’S FIRST PRINCIPLES: (4) DETERMINISM

Zola’s fourth principle is that literary naturalism is deterministic: “Determinism dominates everything” (9). This is perhaps the most discussed feature of literary naturalism. Irving Howe suggests that characters in naturalist texts: “act out the drama of determinism” (292). Philip Rahv characterizes literary naturalism as “pessimistic materialist determinism” (81). And, literary naturalist, James T. Farrell, received letters in which his correspondent turned naturalism into a kind of equation: “F + D = N. . . . F equals fiction, D equals determinism, and N equals naturalism. Fiction plus determinism equals naturalism” (247).

For Zola, determinism operates according to “fixed laws.” In such worlds, the narrator of *Sister Carrie* posits, “Necessity triumphed” (24). When speaking of laws and necessity, literary naturalists would often turn to the language of “force.” As Rahv notes, classic “naturalists were all determinists in that they believed in the omnipotence of natural forces. . . . They regarded the individual as merely ‘a pawn on a chessboard’” (61). In the opening of *Sister Carrie*, the narrator turns suggests the Carrie’s move to the city is driven by “forces wholly superhuman” (2); later, in one of his asides, the narrator lets us know: “Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind” (73). When learning how “the larger view” of the conflicts in the San Joaquin Valley, Presley is told: “You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men. There is the Wheat, the supply. It must be carried to feed the People. There is the demand. The Wheat is one

force, the Railroad, another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have only little to do in the whole business” (576). And, in *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas has “the feeling of being . . . enclosed in the stifling embrace of an invisible force” (149). These forces (variously termed desire, heredity, and environment), depending on the writer, were understood to be located in nature, society, or in the conflict between the two.

“Desire,” the narrator of *Sister Carrie* offers, “is the variable wind which blows now zephyrlike, now shrill, filling our sails for some far-off port, flapping them idly upon the high seas in sunny weather, scudding us now here, now there, before its terrific breath, speeding us anon to accomplishment; as often rending our sails and leaving us battered and dismantled, a picturesque wreck in some forgotten harbor” (97). Referring to passages like this in Dreiser’s work, Howe writes, “man is born to yearn and desire, and yet he lives in a world of limits. He is born to be one step behind himself, urged on by desire; and yet such struggles bring into operation a destructive counter-force. He believes he is independent, a creature of free will; and yet is a mere tool of his appetites, of physical needs, of other men, and of the universe” (138). To be the product of desire is to exist in tension, expressed here spatially, “born to be one step behind himself,” to be “here” and “there.”

Likewise, to be the product of heredity is to exist in a state of conflict. Though the ‘protagonist’ of *McTeague*, at times, seems like a somewhat boring fellow (a dentist), we learn that “Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. . . . The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?” (32). Mac’s body is the site of a conflict between the civilized present and the animal past. The latter is awoken, for example, when he drinks, at which time, “He became an irresponsible animal, a beast, a brute, crazy” (2). At the end of Hurstwood’s degeneration in

Sister Carrie, we told Hurstwood is part of a crowd of men that “waited patiently, like cattle. . . . They looked . . . as dumb brutes look, as dogs paw and whine and study the knob” This potential for atavism always threatens to erupt and reveal the presence of the biological in the social.⁴ Like desire, heredity entails an inherent tension, only instead of that tension being expressed as the relationship between “here” and “there,” it is between the present and the past. In both cases, the point is not whether, at a given moment, the individual is moved here or there, or that they seem of the present (to be ‘civilized’) or past (to be animalistic), but that the individual is expressed as the product of these tensions.

While literary naturalists understood the individual to be determined, on one side, by heredity, individuals were understood to be, on the other side, determined by environment.⁵ As Philip Rahv writes,

I would classify as naturalistic that type of realism in which the individual is portrayed not merely as subordinate to his background but as wholly determined by it—that type of realism, in other words, in which the environment displaces its inhabitants in the role of the hero. . . . The old egocentric formula, “Man’s fate is his character” has been altered by the novelists of the naturalist school to read, “Man’s fate is his environment” (Zola, the organizer and champion of the school, drew his ideas from physiology and medicine, but in later years his disciples cast the natural sciences aside in favor of the social sciences). To the naturalist, human behavior is a function of its social environment; the individual is the live register of its qualities; he exists in it as animals exist in nature. (42-43)

Naturalist texts thus often dilate on setting. The opening chapter of *McTeague* seems to spend more time documenting the life of San Francisco’s Polk Street than it does the life of its protagonist; we witness, (“the panorama unroll itself”) (9). In *Winesburg, Ohio*, the narrator tells us that one of his stories is “the story of a room almost more than it is the story of a man” (92).

⁴ For more on atavism in literary naturalism, see Lehan’s “The European Background.”

⁵ Given the genre’s interest in materialism and its ecological understanding of the world, it should perhaps be unsurprising that critics have often read classic naturalism as the genre equivalent to vulgar Marxism. See, for example, Rahv’s “Notes on The Decline of Naturalism.”

But, environments in most naturalist texts are not only characterized by constant activity, but seem to take on a life of their own. In *McTeague*, Mac's dental parlor itself: "exhaled a mingled odor of bedding, creosote, and ether" (4). By the time we get to *Native Son*, "The biological process of life and death has been transformed, moved from the realm of nature to that of the city" (Lehan 60). Spaces seem to act on the characters. Bigger "had been . . . conditioned in a cramped environment" (240); as a result of this living in this environment, "Bigger felt trapped. . . like living in jail" before he is ever incarcerated (23, 71). In Ann Petry's *The Street*, the protagonist sums up her fate this way: "It was that god-damned street" (436).

Whether rooted in natural or social processes (or a conflict between the two), literary naturalists understood "men and women [to be] part of nature and subject to the same indifferent laws" (Rahv 62). "A like determinism," Zola hypothesized, "will govern the stones of the roadway and the brain of man." The formal corollaries of this idea are found in the various ways to undermine the perception of unencumbered agency in their texts: Carrie is described as "hypnotized [*sic*] by the environment"; Hurstwood commits a theft while drunk; Mac becomes brutish while drinking; Bigger, at crucial moments, is described as "possessed" (84). It is not even always clear that the words the 'characters' speak are meaningfully their own: "The voice of want made answer for" Carrie; in *Native Son*, the voice of Max, Bigger, and the narrator, famously mingle in odd ways.⁶ Literary naturalists similarly use passive-voice constructions that focus more on the effects of a given action than the actor; Bigger, for example, knows that he can only rent housing "where it had been decided that black people might live" (248-49). Boris Max, Bigger's lawyer in *Native Son*, insists that society "planned the murder of Mary Dalton" (394)

⁶ See McEnaney's reading of this dynamic in *Acoustic Properties*, 98-112.

Michael Szalay notes, the agency of systems generally displaces that of the individual in Max's speech and elsewhere in the novel (225-26).

As a result of such systemic accounts of agency, character, in naturalism, becomes completely de-formed, so much so that it encourages us to rethink what we mean by the term.⁷ Zola writes in "The Novel," "character has become the product of the air and the soil, like a plant; it is the scientific conception" (233). But, it often seems even more extreme than this. As Lehan writes: "the naturalistic vision . . . reduc[ed] characters to the behavioristic and deterministic realms. The naturalistic hero is usually inarticulate, devoid of deep subjectivity and moral reflection, . . . the product of his biological makeup and immediate environment, and the victim of an inevitable sequence of events usually triggered by mechanistic forms of chance (66). Similarly, for Richard Poirier, "there is less care given to the characterization of Carrie than to her environmental situations. . . . Environmental force is made altogether more articulate than are any of the characters in the book" (116). Characters, in naturalism, are more akin to types more than fully fleshed-out individuals: in *Sister Carrie*, the protagonist is introduced to us as a literary and sociological type: an ingénue and migrant to the city. In *Native Son*, Bigger is described by his lawyer not as a person, but as a "test symbol": "The complex forces of society have isolated here for us a symbol, a test symbol. The prejudices of men have stained this symbol, like a germ stained for examination under the microscope. The unremitting hate of men has given us a psychological distance that will enable us to see this tiny social symbol in relation to our whole sick social organism" (383). To be a character in a naturalist text is to be a symbol of "the complex forces of society" that created that symbol; it is to be an abstraction that refers to the concrete forces that created it. The standard character in literary naturalism, according to

⁷ For more on the problem of personification in naturalism, see Chapters One and Three.

Lehan, is, ultimately, “a victim: a victim of his temperament, a victim of time, a victim of society that he cannot fully accept or totally reject, a victim of a world that is in constant struggle” (“The Romantic Dilemma” 142).

Literary naturalism is based on the foundational principles of (1) scientific reason, (2) synthetic thought, (3) ecology and organicism, and (4) determinism. While the form evolves over time, the aforementioned principles inform the imaginary of the literary naturalists in both France and America. As such, this dissertation, “‘The Drama of Determinism’: The Evolution of Naturalism in Fiction and Social Thought,” will attend to how the foundational principles of literary naturalism operate in the works of American Naturalists and how these principles change over time and over ‘different’ contexts. We will return to the nature of that change and the adaptation of the principles to different contexts momentarily.

WRITERS ON WRITING: THE UTILITY OF NATURALISM AND ITS PROBLEMS

Before doing so, however, it is important to note that while the principles Zola unpacks in his essay inform American literary naturalists and, consequently, this dissertation, for our purposes, it is equally important that the essay exists in the first place; that is to say, literary naturalists not only write in their chosen medium, but literary naturalists are also constantly drawn to philosophizing (what Irving Howe described as their “stubborn insistence upon learning ‘what it’s all about’” and their “lust for metaphysics”), writing about writing, and writing about the relationship between the arts and the largest of categories (nature/society/history) (293).

American literary naturalists follow Zola in taking up these preoccupations in non-fiction works like Frank Norris’s *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*, Theodore Dreiser’s *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub: A Book of the Mystery and Wonder and Terror of Life*, Richard Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” and James T. Farrell’s “Some Observations on Naturalism, So Called, in

Fiction.” And, in their various works of fiction, American literary naturalists often meditate on the aforementioned relations through the inclusion of characters who are artists (Carrie, the actress in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*; Presley, the poet in Norris’s *The Octopus*; Jim Stark, a stand-in for a Method actor in Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause*⁸) and in other moments of reflexivity.

Literary naturalists, whether in their essays or in their narrative works, often seem to be driven by a desire to account for everything (evidenced, for example in their “panoramas” of social life and their constant narratorial editorializing), interestingly, the existence of their own texts (Rahv 42). But, why? The genre’s investment in determinism and the discourses of the physical and, subsequently, social sciences give us a clue. The discourses of naturalism in the physical and, subsequently, social sciences gave literary naturalists a language and a mode of inquiry to understand the world. In *The Octopus*, for example, the language of naturalism gives Norris a framework for understanding the relationship between wheat farming and the rise of the railroad; between the land, production, and consumption. In other words, the ecological framework allowed Norris to describe the complex relations between, to use the language of the novel, natural and social ‘forces.’ The problem is introduced when one reckons with the fact that these ‘forces’ are not wholly, or even primarily, human, but nevertheless determine the lives of the human.

To account for one’s own writing is to account for the conditions of the creation of that writing, which, for literary naturalists, is to see one’s work as the product of determinism in one way or another. Zola’s work is, again, instructive for unpacking these dynamics:

The [author as] observer relates purely and simply the phenomena which he has under his eyes. . . . He listens to nature and he writes under its dictation. . . . The moment that the result of the experiment manifests itself, the experimentalist finds

⁸ For more on *Rebel Without a Cause* as a naturalist film, see Chapter Three.

himself face to face with a true observation which he has called forth, and which he must ascertain, as all observation, without any preconceived idea. The experimentalist should then disappear, or rather transform himself instantly into the observer.” (“The Experimental Novel” 4)

On the one hand, the author (the “experimentalist”) seems to conduct the experiment. Once the “experiment” is complete, Zola writes, the author “should disappear, or . . . transform himself.” The god-like or magician-like author, here, is aligned with agency (as the figure who conducts the experiment). On the other, the author is passive: the “observer” or medium who “listens to nature and writes under its dictation.” The “experiment,” that is, the novel, “manifests itself.”

While this tension (between the author as an active producer of a text and the author and text as determined) constitutes the conflicted relationship literary naturalists have to their work (which will be discussed momentarily), more often than not, textual production in literary naturalism seems just as much the product of determinism as the social environment. “The plan of” a given naturalist novel, for Zola, “is brought to [the author] by the data themselves, because the facts always classify themselves logically, this one before that one. Inevitably the work takes shape; the story builds itself up from all the observations gathered together, through the lining of the lives of the characters, and the climax is nothing more than a natural and inevitable consequence” (“The Novel” 211). Instead of seeing an author that orchestrates each part of a text, Zola sees a novel that “builds itself up” to a “climax” that is “inevitable.” The form such texts take, in this account, is “inevitable.” Here, too, the Americans often followed Zola’s lead in describing textual production as determined. Describing one of Presley’s writing sessions, the narrator of *The Octopus* notes, “For a time, his pen seemed to travel of itself; words came to him without searching, shaping themselves into phrases, – the phrases building themselves up to great, forcible sentences, full of eloquence, of fire, of passion. As his prose grew more exalted, it passed easily into the domain of poetry” (371-72).

But, if the author is not doing the writing, then who or what is? Here, too, we find several answers given by literary naturalists. Writing and artistic production, in general, is often understood to be produced by nature: as Presley views a panorama of the valley, the narrator informs us that his “personality became blunted, the little wheels and cogs of thought moved slower and slower; consciousness dwindled to a point” and, in its place, “the animal in him stretched itself, purring,” at which point, “he ‘felt his poem’” (44-45). It is “the animal” in Presley, that which is most clearly of nature, that occasions the composition of the text. Alternatively, texts are produced by desire: “The desire of creation, of composition, grew big within” Presley (who is not equivalent with that desire, though it operates within him). Finally, texts are produced by the entire “social organism” : “It was the true California spirit that found expression through [Presley], the spirit of the West” (298). In *Sister Carrie*, artists are, again, “mediums” through which “the world express[es] itself” (485).

Even when literary naturalists did not identify a source (other than the author) that produced a given text, they would often note that the authors themselves were produced by forces beyond them. For Dreiser, (1) the quality of individual expression cannot be reduced to the greatness of the author and (2) the author (no matter how “great”) can only take so much credit for their work: “All great successes, as I was beginning to discover for myself, were relatively gifts” (*HRADD* 255); “‘Why should I be born with a great mind?,’ . . . Did I make myself?” (*HRADD* 107). To have a “great mind” and to produce texts that are considered “great successes,” is to be given a “gift” (a particular fixed quality) by nature. For Norris, great authors and great texts are produced by forces beyond them, but rather than as a result of a fixed quality bestowed upon the writer by nature, writers and texts are produced by their environment:

it is quite possible to make a novelist, and a good one, too. . . . I suspect that, given a difference in environment and training, Rostand would have consolidated

the American steel companies and Carnegie have written L'Aiglon. . . . [W]hen some man . . . living in a more congenial civilization, whose training from his youth up has been adapted to a future artistic profession, succeeds in painting the great picture, composing the great prelude, writing the great novel, don't say he was born a "genius," but rather admit that he was made "to order" by a system whose promoters knew how to wait. (*The Responsibilities of the Novelist* 72, 76)

Artists, in this account, reflect their surroundings, but do not have any special qualities of their own. Depending on the writer, the sense that one's writing is a result of determinism (or a given aspect of it) may or may not feel like a pressing issue. However, to write any treatise on writing, as so many of the literary naturalists do, is to perform an act of self-mythologization, which is to insist in one way or another on the value of one's work.

THE PROBLEM AUTHORSHIP IN LITERARY NATURALISM

And so, we arrive at the central problem this dissertation explores: while the discourses of naturalism gave literary naturalists a useful framework for understanding the world (how physical and social environments determined human action), those same discourses ended up calling into question the freedom—and thus the value—of artists who were themselves understood to be determined by natural and social forces. The problem is that naturalist writers will, in different ways, insist that determinism means, "it is quite possible to make a novelist," while naming one's essay (and book of essays) in which that claim appears, "The Responsibilities of The Novelist." How, over time, literary naturalists frame and navigate both this issue and the larger issue of the relationship between the aesthetic and determinism furnishes the subject matter for this dissertation. As we might expect, a number of factors affect the ways in which literary naturalists frame and navigate these issues over time.

In this account, each particular naturalist text arises out of the relationship between environment (social conditions) and heredity (genre history); to be more specific, the way literary naturalists navigate these issue are framed by the conditions under which that writer

works (that is, one's historical moment and its relation to the author's 'personal' history and subject position), the particular moment in the stage of development of naturalism as a genre, the author's formulation of what constitutes determinism, and the author's attitude towards determinism itself (i.e. "is the author indifferent towards it"; "does the author celebrate it or feel constrained by it?"). Each of these factors inform the content and form of particular naturalist texts and the more general evolution of literary naturalism. As the genre most invested in determinism (whether found in the language of origins, causes, systems, or in its attempt provide a theory of everything, including itself), naturalism offers a privileged site to think through the relation of the work of the artist and their art to the world.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS: CHAPTER ONE

Chapter One, "Acting Naturally in 'The Drama of Determinism': Typical Development in *Sister Carrie*," attends to Irving Howe's turn of phrase, "The Drama of Determinism," as a description of literary naturalism. Intuitively, we might suspect nothing to be less dramatic than determinism; many of the oft-noted features of literary naturalism (its social panoramas, its likeness to sociology, its newspaper reportage-like quality) would seem to confirm this idea. Still, this chapter takes Howe's description seriously as it investigates what might be dramatic about determinism and establishes what constitutes determinism in *Sister Carrie*, in particular, and classic literary naturalism, in general.

The chapter places Carrie's subjection (at the hands of predatory men) and her ultimate rise to fame as an actress in conversation with the discourses of the social sciences and the theatre (including the latter's investment in the physical sciences) by zeroing in on the discourse common to each: type. The chapter shows that the discourse of type rose to prominence in the late 19th century as a way of making sense of complexity through the taxonomy in biology and

sociology.⁹ To make sense of complexity (specifically, unity in difference), the discourse of type relies on some of the core tenants of organicist thought: the inseparable relationship between the part and the whole, between the individual and the group, between an organism and their environment. At the same time, the discourse of type cannot help but refer to archetype, the problem of character (the relation between a given character and the ‘type’ that they represent), and, given the novel’s engagement with the turn-of-the-century theatre, type acting and typecasting. Carrie is both a type actress (in melodramas and farces) and is constantly ‘typecast’ by the men around her as one type or another (the ingénue, the kept woman, etc.).

The chapter shows that *Sister Carrie* marshals the discourse of type not just as a helpful short-hand for a novel that seems to want to give an account of everything, but as a way to account for development (of characters, worlds, and aesthetic forms) in determined worlds and as part of its larger project of creating a form consistent with determinism. The latter (a form consistent with determinism) is what we call literary naturalism, which, most basically, reverses the realist relation of character and world. As Northrop Frye notes, in realism, “characters are prior to the plot” (qtd. in Livingston 138). Thus, while realism is a form created from the inside (character) out (plot), naturalism as a form is created from the outside (plot and setting) in (character), often resulting in the impression that (1) ‘characters’ in naturalist texts do not seem to really be characters at all and (2) those same ‘characters’ are always being tossed this way and that.

The attempt to account for the development of characters, worlds, and aesthetic forms in determined worlds reveals the foundations of the novel’s determinism (in which social worlds mirror bio-physical ones) and follows what Howe might call the “Drama of Determinism” in the

⁹ For more on the relation between type and the discourses of biology and sociology, see Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines*.

novel: a pseudo-Hegelian logic of repetition, negation, and recognition that creates the possibility of transcendence, or, conversion (from one type to another). As recognition in the novel is occasioned by the moment type, as James Livingston would say, “returns to itself” through the confrontation of the material and the aesthetic, this model of development likewise reveals classic naturalism’s insistence on a necessary relationship between (1) subjection and subjectification (2) the determined and the utopian and (3) determinism and the aesthetic, both in that the aesthetic allows for recognition and that the aesthetic is determined not by immaterial factors, but material ones.

In so doing, this chapter accounts for the initial presence of artists and art-making in literary naturalism as a means of coming to terms with the role of the aesthetic in determined development. In tracking these developments, the chapter makes sense of a number of the novel’s odd features (that it is a *bildungsroman* in which development is not based on experience; that Carrie is an actress without agency; that realist – or what came to be known as naturalistic – acting emerges out of type acting). At the same time, the chapter foregrounds and clarifies the centrality of the dramatic and the theatrical to the history of literary naturalism.

Despite the novel’s attempt to demystify development, the chapter closes with a short reading of naturalism’s re-mystification in its initial assumption of immanence (the presence of a totality that does not exist in any one part but is expressed in each) whether one is speaking of the relation between an organism and its environment, individual and the social, or literature and history. Classic Naturalism’s assumption of immanence and its insistence on a necessary relation between the determined and the utopian (and subjection and subjectification) shows the genre’s investment in systemization, but in embracing determinism and necessity, the genre will feel strained when treating issues of gender, seeming to justify all manner of subjugation, in the name

of the evolution of the whole ‘social organism’: “We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail” (Dreiser 73). Thus, while the discourse of type (and the organicist thought on which it relies) proves to be useful for writers to make sense of development in determined worlds, that same discourse could often come across as justifying all manner of oppression under the rubric of necessity.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS: CHAPTER TWO

Chapter Two, “Cause and Affect, or, Richard Wright’s ‘Personalist Naturalism,’” continues to explore many of the threads of the previous chapter: the discourse of type, organicist thought, and relation between the aesthetic and determination. While Dreiser could wholeheartedly embrace determinism, the discourse of type, and organicist thought, this chapter finds Wright responding to each with a sense of ambivalence: for Wright, type, cannot be understood without toxic stereotypes while embracing determinism and organicist thought would often seem to justify racial (and other forms of) oppression. At the same time, Wright found naturalism’s wholly systemic accounts of agency to leave little room for holding bad actors within a given system accountable. And, by the time Wright composed *Native Son*, naturalism’s association with eugenics was well known.

Given these dynamics, Wright’s adoption of naturalist form in his novel, *Native Son*, cannot help but come across as an odd choice. This choice would seem even more curious considering that Wright composed a number of essays in which he expressed a desire for writing to have a social function at the same time as his novel relied on a materialist account of determinism. The problem of form in *Native Son* thus leads to a number of productive questions: “Whence artistic legitimacy in determinism?”; “What is a determinism that involves contingency?”; “What is the relation between Wright’s art and his materialism?”; “Why choose a

genre that is characterized by an underlying belief in black inferiority and reduces blacks to the body?"; "Why would *Native Son* be written in a genre associated with biological essentialism?"; and, "Why would Wright take up a form that implies he is an 'impurity' to be irradiated?"

This chapter argues that Wright solves a number of these interrelated problems at the level of form by modifying classic naturalism in two ways. First, Wright replaces the biological determinism characteristic of classic naturalism¹⁰ with social determinism by turning to the work of urban sociologists at the University of Chicago who used the language of ecology to describe social environments and the processes that create and sustain them. The language of naturalism, shorn of its biological essentialism (and, therefore, racism), allowed Wright to describe the social processes that created the segregated city of Chicago and determined the lives of its inhabitants. Second, I argue that Wright complemented literary naturalism with what he, in an unpublished essay, called a "personalist aesthetic." Paired with the novel's de-formed naturalism, "personalism" allowed Wright to not only account for the social processes that made up his world, but to describe how it might feel to live with the constant burden knowing one's life is determined. And, such a modification allowed Wright to find fault with bad actors in a particular system, while still attending to the system (here, racialized housing) itself. These modifications,

¹⁰ While classic literary naturalism, in rooting its understanding of the world in biology, found the social ecosystem to be a mere replication of biological ecosystems, Wright's novel, rooted in the social ecology of the urban sociologists at the University of Chicago, found almost the exact opposite: that actors within the social ecosystem used *supposed* biological characteristics as an excuse for exploitation and domination. While for classic literary naturalists, heredity and environment were the primary 'forces' that determined all, for Wright, (1) heredity ceases to be a helpful category of analysis (due to its biological essentialism) and (2) environment becomes equivalent with the social environment. At the same time, Wright makes room for a form of determinism that involves contingency. Even in making room for a form of determinism that involves contingency, we find Wright somewhat bristling against the notion of determinism. There is no contradiction, for Wright, between determinism and contingency, between the existence of 'laws' that govern a system and the agency of certain actors within that system, between impersonal forces and bad actors. The novel's ambivalence (in part, characterized by these 'resolutions') also accounts for the sense that, at any one time, the novel will seem invested in forms of thought as various as urban sociology, Marxism, and pragmatism.

which account for the novel's intense ambivalence, make *Native Son* a work of what I term "Personalist Naturalism." This formal resolution renders the novel's form hybrid. In using a hybrid form, the novel not only rejects notions of (aesthetic and racial) purity, but reveals that naturalism, in relying on synthetic thought, was always already hybrid; its eugenicist conclusions could thus only ever be contradictory.

Chapter Two likewise shows that Wright's simultaneous insistence on positing a materialist determinism and his hope for writing to have a social function emerges less from his desire for his writing to make some sort of difference (though that desire is certainly present) than from the role of writing in the segregated city of Chicago. Specifically, given the novel's exploration of restrictive covenants (discursive documents that nevertheless materially impacted the racialization of social space in Chicago), it would perhaps be odd if Wright did *not* come to believe that writing had any social function at all. The novel explores writing in relation to restrictive covenants, in part, as a way of resolving the aforementioned conflict and, in so doing, incorporating restrictive covenants into its very form. While *Native Son* is rigorous in arriving at its conclusions about the relation between materialist determinism and writing, it abandons those conclusions in the novel's last scene as it replaces materialist determinism with a form of mediatic determinism, which, if it is a determinism at all, it is a determinism unworthy of the name. The novel's move from materialist determinism to mediatic determinism is, at the same time, a move from an account of the social that reflects Marxism to one that reflects pragmatism.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS: CHAPTER THREE

Chapter Three, "Naturalism Without a Cause, or, Method Acting, Autonomy, and the Curious 'as if' of the Postwar Subject in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*," picks up many of the threads explored in the first two chapters: the transitions from type acting to naturalist

acting in Chapter One, the move from materialist to mediatic accounts of determinism in Chapter Two, and from a Marxist to a pragmatist account of the social.

The chapter begins with an assessment of the relationship between literary naturalism and pragmatism. While critics (like Jennifer Fleissner and Walter Benn Michaels) have long noted the association of classic literary naturalism and pragmatism, this chapter argues that this relationship is, at the very least, strained, or perhaps, even incompatible, given (1) classic naturalism's tendency towards systemization, reliance on deterministic models of understanding the world, and rejection of interiority and (2) pragmatism's rejection of systems and models and its embrace of 'experience.' To align classic literary naturalism with pragmatism, critics like Fleissner and Michaels end up rejecting what is most essential about classic naturalism: its determinism.

After establishing the incompatibility of pragmatism and classic naturalism, the chapter shows that critics like Fleissner and Michaels may simply be applying a backward-facing glance towards classic naturalism as pragmatist and *late naturalist* understandings of the world (like that of James T. Farrell and, counterintuitively, Nicholas Ray) are almost indistinguishable; this is because both late naturalists and pragmatists (1) focus less on the existence determinism (or its absence) than on the individual's experience and perception of it (2) attend to constraints on free will that emerge from ideological, psychological, and mediatic sources (3) question unencumbered agency without positing a particular form of determinism and (4) are suspicious of 'hard determinisms.' Still, for late naturalists, like Wright before them, constraints on free will are pressing problems to be solved. But, unlike both the classic naturalists and Wright, late naturalists have no system (whether that system is rooted in biology, physics, idealism, or historical materialism) by which to work out these problems.

Rather, as late naturalists are focused less on the existence of determinism than the individual's experience and perception of it, late naturalist 'solutions' to the problem of determinism are themselves confined to the level of perception. As such, late naturalist solutions are attempts to retreat from the world. While we might conclude that late naturalism is not a naturalism at all, the most fundamental elements of naturalism remain in late naturalism: its synthetic or integrative quality and its preoccupation with the problem of determinism. One of the central claims of this chapter is that naturalism, following Richard Lehan, is not only a genre but a mode through which questions about agency are posed in literature ("The European Background" 50-51). And, conversely, questions about agency in literature (after naturalism proper) can be understood as questions about naturalism.

It is in this sense that this chapter reads Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* as a text in the naturalist mode and one that evinces a late naturalist understanding of the world. The world of *Rebel Without a Cause* is a world in which popular understandings of human agency have been shaped by naturalistic discourse, but those discourses have lost many of their materialist associations. Like *Native Son*, *Rebel Without a Cause* entertains the notion of determinism arising from ideological sources: texts. In popular accounts of the time (like Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*), the problem of determinism was often made synonymous with what Timothy Melley calls "agency panic": an "intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control—the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been constructed by powerful external agents" (12). Yet, these popular accounts did not offer meaningful solutions to this problem. For example, after enumerating myriad ways determinism was an active force in everyday life Packard concludes: "We still have a strong defense available against such persuaders: we can choose not to be persuaded" (205).

Method acting, by contrast, attempted to offer a solution to this version of the problem of determinism at the level of perception. In the chapter, Method acting is more than an acting style; instead, it is “an account of subjectivity in which identity and agency are not intrinsic to subjectivity, but rather illusory heuristics to be sincerely treated ‘as if’ they were real.” Method acting, then, acknowledges the presence of constraints on human agency, even as it allowed its practitioners to cultivate the perception of agency. Likewise, as a “soft determinism”¹¹ focused on the perception of agency (rather than its existence or lack thereof), Method acting becomes synonymous with late naturalism in this chapter. The belief, or the lack thereof, in constraints on human agency, for late naturalists, is primary rather than the constraints themselves. While Method acting theory allowed practitioners a way to cultivate the perception of agency, the film makes clear how difficult this theory would be to carry out in everyday life. At the same time, the film suggests that Method acting, and by extension, late naturalism’s move away from material causes and toward individual perception is not without consequences.

As the film ultimately makes clear, because late naturalism is not rooted in structural accounts of agency, there is no way for the late naturalist to work through the problem of determinism; they can only ever obfuscate that problem in one way or another (attempting to retreat into perception) before that problem returns in full force. *Rebel* meditates on the possibility of moving past (or simply ignoring) determinism only to end up reinstating the value of determinist accounts of the world.

¹¹ The idea of “soft determinism” is essentially that all of our actions are determined in the sense that they have a cause, but they are not often coercive. More often than not, our actions are freely chosen. Still, to articulate such a theory is to dilate on the problem or “dilemma” of determinism. For more on “soft determinism,” see James’s “Dilemma of Determinism.”

THE EVOLUTION OF LITERARY NATURALISM

In this telling, the history of literary naturalism evolves from relying on a materialist determinism rooted in biology (as in the French tradition), to one in which the relation between natural and social forces of determinism are understood to be in conflict (classic literary naturalism), to a strictly social form of determinism (Wright), to more ideological versions of determinism (Ray). During this evolution, naturalism's systemic accounts of everything, essentially, metaphysics, give way to historical materialism, pragmatism, before, examining what Michel Foucault called "microphysics of power" (qtd. in Oksala 472).

The subject positions of the authors (as registers of their historical moments) of these texts are certainly not immaterial to this transformation. Classic naturalists like Dreiser could, in the name of the evolution of the 'whole' 'social organism,' embrace an account of determinism and a model of development that entailed the subjection of women and racialized populations, in part, because he was neither a woman nor a member of a racialized population. It is easier to make statements like, "good issued from this crisis, untouched, unassailable, undefiled. . . . the individual suffers, but . . . all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good," as Norris does, if one is not the individual suffering. Wright could not simply accept, without modification, such systemic accounts without coming to terms with the specific ways in which his own suffering was determined by forces over which he had no control. Ray, similarly, entertained what it might be like to retreat into 'private' perception, but knew, as a queer man living during the "lavender scare,"¹² that such retreats could only last as long as state-backed violence could be postponed. It should then be unsurprising to us that the evolution of literary

¹² For more on this, see David K. Johnson's *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*.

naturalism maps onto an increase in attention to affect: from Dreiser's detachment while describing systems to Wright's twin focus on describing systems and responding to those systems with mourning and rage to Ray's hyperfocus on affective states, which are themselves bound up in history. Still, the fact that it is customary in a dissertation like this to track these various changes over time is instructive in itself.

NATURALISM, FORM, AND LITERARY CRITICISM

The way we discuss genre, literature, and literary criticism reflects much of the naturalist tradition. At least since Friedrich Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy*, we have relied on biological metaphors to describe the creation and persistence of genres over time. Following in this tradition, Donald Pizer writes, naturalism “truly ‘refuses to die’ in America” (“Introduction: The Problem of Definition” 14). Pizer, again, notes: “one of the striking characteristics of the [literary naturalist] movement has been its adaptability to fresh currents of idea and expression in each generation while maintaining a core of naturalistic preoccupations” (“Introduction: The Problem of Definition” 13). Genres have a certain “core” (that which continues to be repeated over time), but they also “adapt.” The language of adaptation and evolution is, of course, the language of history. “Genre,” Theodore Martin writes,

describes how aesthetic forms move cumulatively through history. The accretive history of genre is a measure of both change and continuity, diachrony and synchrony, pastness and presentness. Genres explain how aesthetic and cultural categories become recognizable as well as reproducible in a given moment, and they demonstrate how the conventions and expectations that make up those categories are sedimented over time. . . Genre shows us what differentiates the present from the past as well as what ties the two together. (6-7)

Genre, again reflecting the ideas of the naturalist tradition, is rooted in the notion of type: a “category with common characteristics.” The language of type, in this sense, emerged in the mid-19th century as a way of making sense of complexity, to account for difference, similarity,

and unity in difference. The language of type was used in the disciplines of biology and sociology to interpret phenomena as various as the similarities between the individual and the social group, on the one hand, and between species, genus, and family, on the other.

Certain branches of literary criticism follow in the tradition of taxonomizing as a way of making sense of complexity. Northop Frye writes, “there is a place for classification in [literary] criticism, as in any other discipline” (29). Before literary criticism could be “born as an individual science,” though, Frye suggests, it was “an embryo within the body of some other subject. The birth of physics from ‘natural philosophy’ and of sociology from ‘moral philosophy’ will illustrate the process” (17). Like naturalism itself, literary criticism, according to Frye, is synthetic, with one framework (literary criticism) arising out of another (the sciences), retaining aspects of the latter. “Either literary criticism is scientific,” Frye argues, “or all these highly trained and intelligent scholars are wasting their time on some kind of pseudo-science like phrenology” (8). But, to be a “science,” literary criticism requires:

a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole. . . . The first postulate of this inductive leap is the same as that of any science: the assumption of total coherence. . . . We have to adopt the hypothesis, then, that just as there is an order of nature behind the natural sciences, so literature is not a piled aggregate of “works,” but an order of words. (17)

In arguing for the necessity for the initial “assumption of total coherence” in literary criticism, Frye, here, is essentially suggesting that literary criticism rests on some of the same principles that Zola articulated in “The Experimental Novel”: for example, “All things hang together.” Frye (and his descendants in various branches of literary criticism) can be understood as following in the naturalist tradition of Zola (and others) and adding to it: “It is clear that [literary] criticism cannot be a systematic study unless there is a quality in literature which enables it to be so” (18). Like the relationship between the part and the whole (“All things hang together”), the object (“a

quality in literature”) and the experience of that object (“criticism” as “a systematic study”) are organically related. “Literary experience,” likewise, for Frye, is “part of the continuum of [social] life” (15).

THE END(S) OF (ORGANICIST) LITERARY CRITICISM

The relation between certain branches of criticism (for example, archetypal criticism and, in a different register, historical materialism) and literary naturalism should perhaps be unsurprising to use given the fact that literary naturalists self-consciously fashioned themselves as theorists (of literature, of the social, and of the relationship between the two). It is in this sense that literary naturalism might be read as instructive for literary criticism today. To appreciate what this might mean, consider the example from *The Octopus* with which we began; Vanamee tells Presley, “Never judge the whole round of life by the mere segment you can see. The whole is, in the end, perfect.” As Presley ponders this idea, he considers, “what contributed the greatest good to the greatest numbers.”

Literary naturalism, as a way of understanding, or, if you like, a mode of reading (what might be referred to as organicist criticism), rests on the idea that there is a fundamental inadequacy in attending to a “mere segment” of “life” (the particulars) or to the proliferation of “segments” of “life” you can see. Yet, several branches of literary criticism and theory approach reading by attending to a “mere segment” or to the proliferation of “segments.” In literary criticism and theory, the tendency to focus on “segment” can be found in traditions such as New Criticism, decontextualist strands of narratology and formalism, and more recent trends like “surface reading” and “just reading” (Best and Marcus 1-21; Marcus 75). The tendency to focus on a proliferation of “segments” (the particulars) is likewise the subject and form of poststructuralism and postmodernist theory and criticism. The fetishization of the particular in

postmodernism goes by a number of different names: “différance,”¹³ fragmentation, play, flux, contingency, aporia, absence, multiplicity (Derrida 3). This fetish for the particular is, in part, rooted in a suspicion of accounts of totality. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for example, argue, “We live today in the age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers... We no longer believe in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date” (42). Accounts of totality, we are told, tend towards totalitarianism.¹⁴ Given the account offered at the end of *The Octopus* (“Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved”), one certainly understands this concern. At the same time, to even posit the existence of totality requires a “grand narrative,” say historical materialism (Lyotard xxiii–xxiv); this grand narrative can only ever be partial and incoherent because interpretation goes all the way down: “there is no outside-text” (qtd. in Callinicos 76). At times, postmodernist theory will seem to suggest that we are left with endless figures, but no ground; at others, it will seem the exact opposite, that we are left with a single anti-system, language, that can only ever suggest a single idea over and over: interpretation goes all the way down. Language can thus only ever fail to mean exactly.

For literary naturalists, we saw, by contrast, attending to the “segment” (or the endless proliferation of segments) is misleading without reference to “the whole”: “all things hang together.” We noted that, for literary naturalists, “the whole” cannot be reduced to its parts (the endless proliferation of particulars), but has a character of its own, what naturalists would term the “social organism,” or, what we might more commonly call totality. We likewise noted that when attempting to describe the character of the whole, literary naturalists turn to theological

¹³ See Derrida’s *The Margins of Philosophy*.

¹⁴ See, for example, Derrida’s *Of Spirit*.

language: “The larger view . . . discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.” Here, the “whole,” remains opaque; language cannot help but fail to represent that totality. But, for literary naturalists, this is not an excuse to abandon the whole.

Rather, understanding of any sort is only possible by coming to terms with the organic relation between “the mere segment” and “the whole.” This organic relation, for literary naturalists, is, in one sense, baked into the structure of thought. For example, the postmodern dictum that interpretation goes all the way down is an interpretation about the nature of all interpretations (and their relation, or, more precisely, their seeming lack of relation to the world), what becomes the grand narrative of postmodernism itself – difference, here, seemingly cannot help but be brought together under a large unity. In another sense, though, the valorization of the particular (“the mere segment”) is an explicit attempt to reject totality in favor of fragmentation, to reject necessity in favor of contingency, to reject world in favor of words. It is to see “crisis” without relation, “the individual” without collectivity (“the greatest good to the greatest numbers”).

Perhaps, this is why literary naturalism “truly refuses to die in America”: because it is a formal expression of “the larger view” that brings together the “mere segment” with “the whole,” word with world, language with matter. That is, literary naturalism insists on the necessity of relational thought, of not stopping with the “merge segment,” but seeing that segment’s enmeshment with others in a larger whole, and, in the process, unearthing something of the character of the whole: “the larger view.” Literary naturalism, in its insistence on relational thinking, is, in effect, a call, in the theological sense, to that which is not yet:

Yes, good issued from this crisis, untouched, unassailable, undefiled . . . the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner

of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.

To turn away from totality (and the relational thinking of literary naturalism) is to turn away from that which is not yet¹⁵ (from freedom on the other side of necessity); such a turn is, at the same time, a turn towards a world of pure difference in which no communication, no shared ground of any sort, no action, is possible; in such a world, we are left, in the end, with injustice without a cause.

¹⁵ For more on that which is “not yet,” see Bewes’ *Reification: Or, The Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, page 33.

Acting Naturally in “The Drama of Determinism”: Typical Development in *Sister Carrie*

ingénue, n.

An artless, innocent girl or young woman; also, the representation of such a character on the stage, or the actress who plays the part.

We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail.

Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

Natural selection . . . is apparently much more active in preserving than in changing types.

Charles H. Cooley, “The Process of Social Change”

The question of sentimental characters now remains.

Émile Zola, “Naturalism on the Stage”

At the halfway point of *Sister Carrie*, the titular character of Theodore Dreiser’s naturalist novel ventures to the Grand Opera House in Chicago to look for a job as an actress. Upon her arrival, Carrie meets with the manager of the company. After asking how she might “go about getting on the stage,” the manager asks what is motivating her to do so (253). To which, she replies, “I need to make a living” (253). Upon receiving some advice, “Carrie smiled genially, grateful that he should condescend to advise her even so much. He noticed the smile and put a slightly different construction on it” (253). The manager interprets a particular feature of Carrie’s body (her “smile”) as a sign of promiscuity. The manager’s attempt to read Carrie’s body is indistinguishable from his interpretation of that body as having the characteristics of a particular kind or type. To him, Carrie is “just another pair of tights” (255). While this interaction is rooted in necessity¹⁶ for Carrie (“I need to make a living”), it is just “an easy chance for a little flirtation” for the manager (253). But, more importantly, the manager here not only gathers information about Carrie, but attempts to instrumentalize that information for his

¹⁶ Later, this is even more apparent; Carrie tells Hurstwood that being an actress “It’s better than going hungry” (378).

own ends. Specifically, the manager attempts to take what he knows about Carrie's precarious position, his ostensible ability to read her as a particular type (based on bodily signs), and his position (a manager who could hire her) in order to sleep with her, gesturing to the habit of male characters in the novel of associating actresses with prostitutes. This imbalance of power, which corresponds to access to resources and jobs at the turn of the century along gendered lines, structures the interaction and leads to the possibility of sexual subjection. As the conversation continues, the manager asks: "have you ever tried to get in as a chorus girl?" . . . assuming a more confidential air. Carrie began to feel that there was something exuberant and unnatural in his manner" (254). While, for the manager, the interaction is rooted in the legibility of word ("I need to make a living"), social standing, and the sense that bodily sign corresponds to a particular type, for Carrie it is rooted in "feel[ing]" about this man in particular, specifically, his bodily signs ("something exuberant and unnatural in his manner"). Still, Carrie's feeling remains fairly inarticulate ("something"). Carrie is also unable to see the manager the way that he sees her: as a type. And, Carrie, too, is unable to type herself. Later though, at height of the novel, when Carrie confronts a character from her past, she is able to articulate what had remained only a vague feeling previously: "she understood him better now – understood the type" (473).

In this scene, and throughout the novel, type has a number of valences. Type in "the general sense 'category with common characteristics' arose in the mid 19th century." On one level, type cannot help but refer to archetype and the problem of representation more broadly (here, that of "the particular and the general") (Seltzer 111), specifically, the problem of character in naturalists texts. On another, given the novel's interest in the biological at the turn of the century, the discourse of type also refers to the taxonomic impulse characteristic of evolutionary thought. On still another, the novel, like most naturalist fiction, is interested in the

sociological and therefore points to the division of labor and the rise of statistics at the same moment.¹⁷ And, type also refers to a kind of ideal with unmistakably spiritual connotations; for example, a type is “a person, object, or event of Old Testament history, prefiguring some person or thing revealed in the new.” In this instance, types are simultaneously things in themselves (a moment in a history), the objectification of that thing (the description of a history), a pre-cursor to something yet to be realized (a re-writing of that history), and once that something is realized, a backward looking piece of ‘evidence’ of the culmination of a larger history (a further re-writing of a history or the redefinition of that history the moment that something new in history is said to occur).¹⁸ The discourse of type thus gives us language to explain how a seemingly fixed thing (a type) can become something else in a world that is simultaneously fixed (i.e. one that operates according to deterministic laws) and unstable (in that it exists in time) without primarily appealing to experience.

Accordingly, to type is to attempt to fix in time while, wittingly or not, anticipating both the fulfillment of that fixing and its transcendence. For this to happen, of course, type must be typical, that is, must be repeated. But, type must not only be repeated, it must be negated, one version of which is understanding things which it is not. One cognate of negation in the novel is “contrast.” The narrator tells us that “the heart understands when it is confronted with contrasts” (337). At first, this idea sounds as if experience (and one’s understanding of the world) is primarily aesthetic. However, the experience of contrast in the novel is rooted in material conditions and becomes the basis of a certain kind of awareness. For example, Carrie initially thinks nothing of her clothing, but, noticing another passenger’s “cause[s] her to study her own,”

¹⁷ For more on statistics and naturalism, see Seltzer.

¹⁸ For a much more sophisticated account of levels of interpretation in theology, see Jameson, especially 16-22.

which “makes her conscious of an inequality” between them (7). In other words, the discourse of contrast in the novel is rooted in the experience of an object, its negation, and a new experience of that object that arises out of the two. Applied to type, similarity over time becomes evident through repetition and negation, at which point, the possibility of becoming something else is generated through recognition. Repetition, negation, and recognition then create the possibility of transcendence, or, conversion. Mark Seltzer has noted that the fundamental process at work in sociology’s use of statistics is “the conversion of individuals into numbers and cases” (100). Or, referring back to the scene with which we began, the conversion of signs into types. However, types themselves in the novel are further converted from type to type in some cases for the purposes of subjection (i.e. to instrumentalize type as the theatre manager attempts to) and others at the moment of subjectification. Irving Howe’s comment on the relationship between character and world in Dreiser’s overall body of work suggests one way this might play out: “whatever their individual lot, they all act out of the drama of determinism” (294). Howe’s comment suggests that determinism, counterintuitively, might be dramatic and that drama may have a central part to play in determinism itself.

Determinism is dramatized in the novel, in part, through its exploration of the experience of subjection and subjectification¹⁹ found in one final form of type: type acting, specifically, melodramatic type acting, and the logic of typecasting. In the novel’s hands, typecasting is neither primarily an aesthetic matter nor just a version of epistemic violence, as in the reduction of person to thing. Rather, typecasting in the novel arises out of the uneven distribution of resources and opportunities that correlate to one’s gender at the turn of the century. Typecasting

¹⁹ This paper’s account of subjectification as rooted in subjection and, in some cases, in relation to particular spatial regimes is indebted to Daniel Nemser’s exploration of these concepts in colonial Mexico in his excellent, *Infrastructures of Race*.

is just one form of the exploitation of that unevenness by predatory males for the purposes of sexual domination. Type, emerging out of a distinct socio-historical context, is complicated by a kind of reflexivity generated by the aesthetic and participation in aesthetic production. Type (and the gendered distribution of resources and opportunities that correlate to gender) is ultimately subject to change in the novel not by evading typecasting, but because it has been determined by it. As we will see, the determinism of type is both fulfilled and transcended when type “returns to itself” and, finally, in this case, gives rise to the naturalistic actor.

The novel’s suggestion that type is not fully transcended until it is overcome in practice can be traced to the concept of “reflex action” (James 113).²⁰ Though the implications of the concept was much debated, William James provided a fairly impartial definition: “the acts we perform are always the result of outward discharges from the nervous centres [*sic*], and that these

²⁰ Though the relation of impression and reaction is determined, the nature of that relation was up for debate. James writes, “applied at first to only a portion of our acts, this conception has ended by being generalized more and more, so that now most physiologists tell us that every action whatever, even the most deliberately weighed and calculated, does, so far as its organic conditions go, follow the reflex type” (113). The fundamental difference in the conception of the “reflex arc” between “physiologists” and Spencerians on one hand and pragmatists (James and John Dewey most explicitly) on the other is (1) how reflective the “reflex type” could ever be and (2) whether the relationship between cause and effect is based on biology or physics. For both Dewey and James, there is no contradiction between “reflex action” and meaningful reflection. As James writes, “the central process of reflection exists only for the sake of calling forth the final act. . . the middle stage of consideration or contemplation or thinking is only a place of transit, the bottom of a loop, both whose ends have their point of application in the outer world” (113). This “middle stage,” for James and Dewey, can be stretched to the point that the idea of “reflex” threatens to lose its meaning even as thought remains ever directed to producing action, however indirectly. In an organic model, “the current of life” is various in that there are a number of stimuli in any given environment (sights, sounds, etc.) and a multitude of ways to experience those stimuli (e.g. looking up at The Empire State Building in front of it, seeing it from a ferry on the Hudson, or looking down from atop it). Dewey will go to great lengths to show that the model of the “physiologists” and Spencerians, separates cause from effect, or action and “re-action.” To Dewey, this model (based on the principles of physics) is inadequate because it assumes a relationship between the two that is, at bottom, inorganic (despite “physiologists” using the body as the point of reference). Though this last difference may seem a small one, it is fundamental to understand how a given type can and cannot be overcome in the novel. In an inorganic model, by contrast, an object responds mechanically.

outward discharges are themselves the result of impressions from the external world, carried in along one or another of our sensory nerves. . . . The current of life which runs in at our eyes or ears is meant to run out at our hands, feet, or lips. . . . All action is thus *re*-action upon the outer world” (113-14). “Re-actions,” in this framework, directly follow a body’s exposure to “the current of life.” “If it should ever happen that it led to no active measures,” James writes, “it would fail of its essential function” (114). Though exposure cannot fail to produce a response, it is not the case that an organism is exposed to a single impression at any given time: “there is no impression of sense which, *unless inhibited by some other stronger one*, does not immediately or remotely express itself in action of some kind” (James 113; emphasis added). Consequently, the organism’s “*re*-action upon the outer world” is dictated by the strength of the impressions to which it is exposed. Applying this framework to the novel, Carrie’s type remains determined by the strength of the impressions to which she is exposed: the experience of necessity and her arrangements with her lovers prove to be “stronger” than flashes of recognition, however partial, for much of the novel. Type is only overcome when the experience of recognition is elevated to such a degree that it becomes “stronger” than being directed this way and that, whether by necessity or her lovers.

Before turning to how these dynamics get worked out in the novel, it is worth noting of what this determinism will consist. For Richard Lehan and Jennifer Fleissner, determinism in naturalism arises out of the relation between the natural and the social. Lehan has argued that “Dreiser applied [Herbert] Spencer’s law of conflicting forces to social as well as natural processes” and noted the ways in which “economics have a biological basis” in naturalist texts (“The Romantic Dilemma” 139; “The European Background” 66). For Fleissner, naturalism marks the “introduction into history of natural forces” (2); rather than fixed, nature comes to be

understood in a “questioning sense: ‘nature;’ newly fashioned into an ‘ism,’ a category to reconceived as part of social life” (Fleissner 6). The accounts of naturalism offered by Lehan and Fleissner show that, (1), the natural and the social are mutually constitutive²¹ of one another in naturalism, and (2), attending to the scientific valences of naturalism need not mean naturalization (in the sense of being ahistorical) or delving into essentialism. As the natural and the social are mutually constitutive of one another, any account of the determinism at the center of naturalism would do well to begin with this relation.

For Dreiser, perhaps the most important theorist of the relation of the natural and the social was the polymath Herbert Spencer.²² For Spencer, at the base of the universe is force and chemical matter in that order; this is the case because the universe is defined by constant activity, whether it be force acting on matter or one force in conflict with another. Humans, in this framework, are bits of matter. Dreiser summarized this view as “Newton’s law working out in human affairs,” rendering “human nature . . . a thing of rough balances and equations” (*Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub*²³ 163). The natural laws of physics then serve as the basis of evolutionary biology. Like a good many other theorists of evolution, Spencer found evidence for life forms in the universe evolving from simple to complex, homogeneous to heterogeneous. In both cases, humans were understood to be determined by natural forces.

As he turned to the study of sociology (the last major task of his career), Spencer posited a continuity between these natural forces and contemporary society. Just as evolutionary biology

²¹ While these categories are mutually constitutive for Fleissner, in her account, naturalist worlds are less deterministic than they are organized around “compulsion.”

²² For an early take on Dreiser’s familiarity with Spencer (specifically, the latter’s ideas about evolution and dissolution), see Katope.

²³ Hereafter cited as *HRADD*.

showed life forms in the universe evolving from simple to complex, so, too, modern society seemed to evolve in a similar fashion with the division of labor. For Spencer, Robert Perrin notes, “the modern individual is a discrete entity or personality who is literally created as an effect of the advancing division of labor” (qtd. in Lizardo 544). And, just as the evolutionary biologist could taxonomize, so, too, could the sociologist name and describe concrete social relations, one manifestation of which, is type. As Omar Lizardo writes, “cataloguing differences in emotion, cognition, memory, perception, conceptualization, and so forth between ‘higher’ and primitive’ societies in fact takes up the bulk of the first part of [*First Principles*]” (545). Yet, when addressing the social order, Spencer was equivocal about the relation of the parts to the whole. For, on the one hand, as his understanding of the world was primarily derived from physics, he tended to see the whole as composed of nothing more than distinct bits of matter: “the character of the aggregate is determined by the characters of the units,” committing the fallacy of composition²⁴ characteristic of much conservative thought (48). In this sense, the only way those distinct parts can be brought together is in descriptions of likeness, that is, through representation: sociology “has to ascertain what traits there are in common, determined by the common traits of human beings; what less-general traits, distinguishing certain groups” (53). On the other hand, from his work as a theorist of evolution, there is, more often, a sense that the relation of the part to the whole is an organic one as society itself was understood to be an organism capable of evolution.²⁵ In both cases, the tendency of the whole is towards “harmony,” the cancelling out of conflicting forces on a long enough timeline.

²⁴ For more on the fallacy of composition in neo-naturalist thought, see McClanahan 21-55, especially 29-33.

²⁵ For more on the “social organism,” see Spencer’s “The Social Organism.”

And, most important for our purposes, is Spencer's account of the relationship between selection, environment, and emotion. Jonathan H. Turner and Seth Abrutyn write, "Spencerian selection . . . is Lamarckian in that it is driven by needs, motives, interests, and power relations to 'acquire' somehow, perhaps anyhow, new sociocultural phenotypes" (535). In this case, "selection does not sort among existing variants but pushes actors to create new variants that can deal with a real or perceived problem revolving around production, reproduction, regulation, and distribution" (Turner and Abrutyn 535). In other words, there is a decent amount of plasticity in Spencerian selection that allows for the creation of "new variants" and "sociocultural phenotypes" even as each remains determined. Turner and Abrutyn note, "Marx's emphasis on the 'contradictions' that always exist in the organization of production (save for his communist utopia) is another way of arguing for Spencerian selection" (538). Out of those contradictions, Turner and Abrutyn write, "those who are subordinate or marginalized and who do not perceive that they receive a fair share of resources will experience a variety of deprivations that accumulate into a set of grievances that, initially, are *only vaguely articulated* but that, nonetheless, arouse intense negative emotions" (538; emphasis added). "For Spencer," Lizardo writes, "human cognitive, emotive, and moral faculties 'co-evolved' with social development" (545). Thus, "the development of specific cognitive abilities (i.e., the capacity to engage in abstract thought) was inherently dependent on the growth of complex social and ecological environments. In the same manner, the development of affective and moral capacities, which facilitated 'sociability' and 'cooperation,' required the emergence of differentiated societies" (Lizardo 545). This form of determinism gets worked out in the novel's exploration of melodrama type acting and naturalistic acting.

It is neither immediately clear why an actress in a naturalistic text would not be a naturalist actress nor why the pairing might be incompatible; this is less the case because Carrie primarily plays parts in melodrama and farces (making her, specifically, more of a type actress) than because naturalistic acting, in some fundamental ways, clashes with a naturalist understanding of the relation between character and world.²⁶ Northrop Frye has suggested that one of the most striking features of realism is that “characters are prior to the plot” – that is, realism is a form created from the inside (character) out (plot) (qtd. in Livingston 138). Setting, in this account, is often secondary to both. James Livingston²⁷ suggests that according to Frye’s definition, naturalism cannot be understood as a form of realism because naturalism, like romance, reverses the realist relation of character and world: it is a form created from the outside (setting and plot) in (character) (138). As a consequence, character in realist texts is of utmost importance because they move the action along while in naturalist texts world and plot that are primary. For Livingston, there is an “absence of characterization” in texts like *Sister Carrie* (138); instead, of fully-developed characters like those found in realism, Livingston notes, Carrie

²⁶ Walter Benn Michaels writes, “the plays she attends and then performs in are theatrical equivalents of the sentimental novel” (45).

²⁷ This paper reflects a number of concerns found in Livingston’s account of *Sister Carrie*. Most notably, this paper shares (1) Livingston’s interest in the possibility of self-reflexivity in the novel; (2) the use of Hegelian language in discussions of (1); (3) how different genres figure character differently; and (4) the sense that there is no contradiction between capitalism and the creation of selves. However, this paper departs from Livingston in a number of ways. Most notably, as Livingston’s account of pragmatism necessitates that he “write as if thoughts were things, and *vice versa*,” transcendence in his account is far too easy because it is rooted in the world of ideas rather than material subjection (xxiii). Recognition in the novel, for example, does not automatically entail the end of subjection. This paper also does its best ground its account of recognition, reflexivity, and transcendence in materiality (largely reflecting a Spencerian rather than pragmatic account of the social). Desire, in Livingston’s account (as for a number of critics of the novel), is, understandably, of utmost importance. In this account, necessity is primarily what moves the action forward. And, in Livingston’s account, the body is the ground for the subject’s coherence over time. Here, this coherence is often undermined by the presence of evolutionary forces that always threaten to undo that subject. Consequently, in this account, the novel does not just track the movement from objecthood to subjecthood as a streamlined process, but suggests that this is a violent process and one that can ultimately be undone.

is “vacant” and “inarticulate” (139). Even the heroine of something of a *bildungsroman* is largely flat. Likewise, Lehan writes: “the naturalistic vision . . . reduc[ed] characters to the behavioristic and deterministic realms. The naturalistic hero is usually inarticulate, devoid of deep subjectivity and moral reflection, . . . the product of his biological makeup and immediate environment, and the victim of an inevitable sequence of events usually triggered by mechanistic forms of chance (66). In this framework, agency, in such texts, could be found in heredity, environment, and the conflict between the two, but was not a special property of humans. If we think of the move from realism to naturalism as a linear one (which is but one way to figure this movement), the place of the human gets notably diminished. One of the most distinguished proponents of this view in fiction was Émile Zola.

In “The Experimental Novel,” Zola, attempting to return humans to their proper place in nature, suggested that the task of the naturalist novelist was fundamentally to experiment on their characters. Characters, Zola argued, are simply particular arrangements of matter, no different from other arrangements of matter: (“A like determinism will govern the stones of the roadway and the brain of man”) (8). Because of this, characters, whether rendered in mechanistic (“Dissect piece by piece this human machinery in order to set it going through the influence of the environment”) (13) or bio-chemical terms (“we should operate on the characters, the passions, on the human and social data, in the same way that the chemist and the physicist operate on inanimate beings, and as the physiologist operates on living beings”) (9), were little more than objects. Part of the novelist’s task was then to show a given set of laws and conditions in operation: “the exterior and interior conditions are purely chemical and physical, and this aids [the novelist] in finding the laws which govern” characters (“Experimental” 10). In their obsession with experiments and laws, naturalist texts understandably shift emphasis from

character to world. Consequently, naturalist worlds are worlds in which characters are dominated by laws that govern them even as certain laws (e.g. heredity and environment) presuppose interaction. Yet, Zola describes the relation of character and world differently in his essay on naturalist theatre; that is, he suggests an alternate possibility for the naturalist formula.

In “Naturalism on the Stage,” a veritable manifesto advocating for a revolution in the theatre, Zola develops an account of character and world that the naturalist theatre should embody that, in all of its vigor, misses, (1), the compatibility between the kind of theatre he was revolting against and the relation of character and world he had developed in the previous essay and, (2), that he ends up reinstating a version of progress and character he had attempted to refute. Parts of “Naturalism on the Stage,” seem to fit within the framework described in “The Experimental Novel.” For example, the task of the naturalist theatre is “depicting life as it is” (13), or to “reproduce reality in its entirety” (11). Reflecting a positivist account of knowledge, the world in this essay is still, for Zola, an objective thing that can be known and “reproduce[d].” Character, at times, still seems incomplete in the essay: “description is part of [the author’s] formula to put down full details about the character, and to make him complete by means of his environment” (11). Others at first seem to fit within the framework established in the earlier essay, but then turn out to be a striking departure; of dialogue, Zola wrote: “what I want to hear in the theatre is spoken language. If we are not able to reproduce on the stage a conversation with its repetitions, its length, and its useful words, the emotion and tone of the conversation could be kept; the individual turn of mind of each speaker, the reality, in a word, reproduced to the necessary extent” (12). The spoken language of every-day life and “the turn of mind” of the speaker is synonymous with a “reality” that Zola believes in, but had not seen on the stage as of 1881. Interestingly, Zola, ever the prophet, believes this change will come about, not by

materialist means, but by idealistic ones, in the evolution of the audience's "taste" specifically (13). Most pointedly, in this essay, the naturalist theatre and naturalistic acting is very close to, if not the same as, the realist relation between character and world as the task of naturalism, in this telling, is to attend to "the double influence of characters over facts, of facts over characters," or, environment over character and character over environment (10). This, too, Zola suggests had not come to pass in 1881. What was needed was an evolution in the theatre. Instead of finding "Naturalism on the Stage," Zola found the stage to be: "the last citadel of conventionality" (7), a medium full of "romantic fictions, worn-out plots" (8), "sentimental characters" (13), "repeated generalities" (13), "infantile game[s]" (10), "child's play" (10), and, most tellingly, "sympathetic puppets" rather than "real character[s] drawn from life" (7). What Zola seems to be protesting against here, specifically, as we will see, is melodrama.

Yet, Zola protests too much: each of these features (especially the notion of "sympathetic puppets") of melodrama would, on its face, actually seem to fit well within a naturalist understanding of the relation between character and world. As Zola himself admits, naturalism is a "formula." But, what is a formula if not the definition of "conventionality?" How does one create a formula if there are not "generalities" that can be "repeated?" And what are experiments if not "games" played by the author with their characters? The emphasis on world in naturalism seems to imply a very similar understanding of characters as flat and not fully-developed ("puppets," "child[ren]" "infant[s]"), pulled this way and that ("sympathetic puppets"), as that found on "the last citadel of conventionality": melodrama.²⁸ What is unclear is how the naturalist understanding of the relation of character and world fits with "the double influence of characters over facts, of facts over characters" as naturalism greatly privileges world over character; "the

²⁸ Melodrama is often described as "childish" and rooted in "naivete" (Taylor 112; Day-Mayer and Mayer 103).

double influence of characters over facts, of facts over characters,” as noted, actually seems to be the definition of realism. Not coincidentally, “naturalistic acting” today has lost much of its association with naturalism proper and now colloquially refers to any species of acting taken to be realistic. Ultimately, there is no conflict between a naturalist understanding of character and world (and therefore the naturalist stage) on one hand and the conventions of melodrama (“sympathetic puppets”), and an “absence of characterization” on the other. But, there is a real conflict between a realist understanding of character and world (“the double influence of characters over facts, of facts over characters”) and a naturalist one (“A like determinism will govern the stones of the roadway and the brain of man”).²⁹ As we will see, *Sister Carrie* will ultimately show how a naturalist understanding of character and world (complete with “convention,” “absence of characterization,” and “sympathetic puppets”), in short, the world of types, generates the possibility of “the double influence of characters over facts, of facts over characters” not through a change in the audience’s taste, but by the fulfillment and transcendence of melodramatic type in naturalist materialism.

Contrary to Zola’s posturing, there are a number of similarities between melodrama and naturalism. Daniel Gerould, for example, suggests that “Naturalism is melodrama in slow motion, stretched out over many years and many pages, exhaustive in its repetitive thoroughness” (qtd. in Straub 230). Peter Brooks writes, “the connotations of [melodrama] are probably similar for us all. . . the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions” (11). All of these descriptions (save “moral polarization”) could equally be applied to naturalism. Both genres are obsessed with “forces” whether material in the case of Spencerian naturalism or “mysterious” in the case of

²⁹ For more on sentimentalism and naturalism, see Fleissner.

melodrama (Brooks 7). To the extent that *Sister Carrie* is representative, in both genres “everything has to be clearly explained to the spectators” or the reader as the case may be (Taylor 113). And, most importantly, for our purposes, both genres, (1), imply a ‘fallen’ world, (2), place a high premium on physicality (and ground that physicality in the discourses of science), and, (3), make character synonymous with type. We will treat each of these in turn.

Naturalism and melodrama can be understood as different reactions to the loss of the sacred. Helen Day-Mayer and David Mayer write that melodrama is a “lapsarian philosophy” that mourns the loss of and attempts to reinstate various “Edens” (105). In melodrama, Day-Mayer and Mayer write: “ideas of secular and divine justice and recompense are not always met” (101). Peter Brooks is even more explicit about the relation of melodrama to the loss of the sacred as he writes that melodrama emerges from “the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom” (15). For Zola and others, naturalism entailed a similar move away from the sacred: “it is surely an object large enough to try to know the entire mechanism of nature, without troubling one’s self for the time being with the origin of the mechanism” (“Experimental” 19); thus, naturalism: “substitutes for the study of the abstract and the metaphysical man the study of the natural man, governed by physical and chemical laws, and modified by the influences of his surroundings” (“Experimental” 11). If naturalists understand its response to the loss of the sacred to be intellectual (“the study of . . . physical and chemical laws”), “melodrama responds with emotion rather than intellect” (Day-Mayer and Mayer 101). Hurstwood’s unfortunate “fall” in the novel, fittingly, begins with religious language (“temptation,” “thou shalt not,” “Lord,” “soul”) and ends with biological and social language (268-269): “the animal’s instinctive recoil at evil. Men are still led by instincts before

they are regulated by knowledge. It is instinct which recalls the criminal” (269). Yet, due to the fact that we know, (1), the ostensible angel and devil speaking to him throughout the scene have previously been identified as the voice of convention and the voice of necessity (90-91), and (2), that his fall is specifically related to fortune, this fall is the product not of anything resembling free will or divine planning, but the triumph of the material (naturalism) and conventional (melodrama).

Consequently, the physical body (and its ability to communicate through gesture) in naturalism and melodrama takes on the utmost importance. Peter Brooks writes though “the word melodrama means, originally, a drama accompanied by music” (“It appears to have first been used in this sense by Rousseau”), “Rousseau” then used it “to characterize a popular drama derived from pantomime” (114). Gesture is thus foundational to melodrama. Helen Day-Mayer and David Mayer note that it was also Rousseau who first theorized that “gesture” could be understood “as a signifier of emotional and, to a lesser degree, conceptual meaning” (104). For Percy Fitzgerald, “gesture [was] a language to express ideas that are not written... for which words are too coarse and inefficient (qtd. in Day-Mayer and Mayer 108). In chapter thirteen, subtitled, “A Babel of Tongues,” prior to Hurstwood’s ‘fall,’ narrator tells us: “People in general attach too much importance to words. They are under the illusion that talking effects great results. They but dimly represent the great surging feelings and desires which lie behind. When the distraction of the tongue is removed, the heart listens” (118). The aim of gesture in melodrama is to not only mean, but to make meaning obvious: to make the body produce “legible emblems” (Taylor 113). “Despite employing a limited range of emblems to personify their characters,” George Taylor writes, “the actors’ expression of elemental emotions had to be explicit, intense, and infectious” (113). Markedly influenced by the idea of a ‘fall,’ a number of

acting theories in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries claimed that in a prelapsarian moment (oftentimes prior to spoken language), “people everywhere communicated by gestures that were universally read and understood” (Day-Mayer and Mayer 105). The state of perfection, when gesture communicated all (prior to “Babel”), was then understood to be outside of and often prior to spoken language.

Many of these same theories of melodramatic acting were also influenced by a number of the same fields of science that influenced naturalism³⁰: physics and biology. Just as Spencer is prior to Darwin, and physics prior to biology, in acting theory “a mechanistic view of nature” preceded a biological one (67). Joseph Roach argues that, “the notion that the management of the face, limbs, and torso should conform to certain ideal patterns . . . derives from . . . physics. Mechanization objectified and exteriorized the passions, draining them of their subjective content. . . . machines lack individuality, except by terms of the most clear-cut classification into objective types” (67). Such a description, of course, sounds like “vacant” and “inarticulate” Carrie, thrown this way and that by various “forces,” always being “typed.” Roach suggests that mechanistic types (“a single substance variously modified”) (67), over time, begin to bleed into biological types: “it is certainly not coincidental that eighteenth-century science was characterized by great advances in botanical and zoological classifications. . . . [For actor,] Charles Macklin, the passions ‘are all to be distinguished into *genus*, *species*, and individual characteristics, like dogs, fowl, apples, plums, and the like’” (67). Similarly, Day-Mayer and Mayer note that

[François] Delsarte and his subsequent interpreters recognized scientific descriptions of the body (by, for example, Charles Darwin) as programmed to respond to intellectual, environmental, and emotional stimuli in certain predictable – mechanical – ways, via gestures and bodily movements. But

³⁰ For more on the transformation of acting theory over time in response to various scientific developments, see Roach.

Delsarte also observed that individuals acquire many personal traits and unconscious gestures that become habitual and are deployed to express emotional states or to assist transactions that are understandable only by those closest to the user and are to others (theater audiences) altogether unreadable. (Day-Mayer and Mayer 106)

The acquisition of “personal traits” throughout a person’s life would have made them a bad melodramatic actor because it would render them and their gestures less easily legible.³¹ Day-Mayer and Mayer write, because such acquired characteristics could make the melodrama actor’s gestures illegible, “the actor was encouraged to shed individual traits and to acquire a standard, but aestheticized, gestural vocabulary imagined to be close to” a “lost universal gestural vocabulary” (105). Paradoxically, then, whether framed in terms of a ‘fall’ or the development of “personal traits and unconscious gestures” through “habit,” actors who already had acquired characteristics would have to “learn” how to act naturally, to become a type. Although acting “is at once the most natural as well as the most understandable of the graces,” the narrator suggests, “it scarcely occurs to the inexperienced onlooker that it must be difficult to be natural” (158). As is evident from the accounts given by Roach, Day-Mayer, and Mayer, in accounts of acting in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, there is a certain slippage between mechanistic and biological models, between deterministic forces and the development of habit, between the species and the individual.

Whether rendered in mechanistic, biological, or religious terms, the place of gesture in such systems is to produce recognizable types. Irving Howe writes: “Dreiser understood the effort to represent common experience requires . . . an effect of heightening and intense exaggeration”; a given character “may be representative, but his conduct must be extreme” (298). Howe’s comment suggests that there need not be any contradiction between the

³¹ Bringing the actor’s ‘personality’ to bear on a role and the ambiguity of the actor’s intention are, of course, marks of good realist acting.

“representative” and the “common” on one hand and “heightening and intense exaggeration” on the other. Melodramatic type would seem to be the embodiment of this idea. Taylor writes that melodrama “actors tended towards stereotypical representation rather than individualized characterization. They had been specifically employed to embody the ‘stock characters’ of the company” (113). Specific characters, in the melodramatic theatre, are replaced by what Zola might call “generalities” or “sympathetic puppets” rather than “real character[s] drawn from life.” Day-Mayer and Mayer echo Taylor and add a greater degree of specificity to his claim: “the [melodrama] actor performs a stereotypical role. In a standard stock, repertory, or ‘combination’ company . . . many specialized in a particular ‘line,’ or role, consistent in character and dramatic function from melodrama to melodrama. Indeed, so stereotypical and morally defined were such roles that they could be burlesqued” (102). As Day-Mayer and Mayer let us know, the “combination’ company” is a “general” group composed of further “generalities” with “defined” functions, the division of labor in miniature. These “generalities” are “repeated” “from melodrama to melodrama” as one role “consistent in character and dramatic function” bleeds into one another in a kind of “line.” As this “line” gets reinforced, it starts to stick, making development appear as a kind of stasis.³² At that point, the relationship between role and type is defamiliarized: the two still exist in an organic relation, but what is foregrounded is type over the specific role. To be cast “consistent[ly] in character and dramatic function from melodrama to melodrama” is, of course, typecasting. As the word typecasting makes clear, type is as much a process as a product. The ability to type, the novel suggests, is rooted, in part, in the rise of evolutionary semiotics.

³² For more on stasis and melodrama, see Szalay.

The ability to read type, then, is not innate in the novel, but the result of a particular phase of individual evolution; the novel most explicitly shows the evolution of this ability in the character George Hurstwood. In the final scene of the novel, a crowd of homeless men are waiting in line to get into a cheap hotel in the Bowery on a cold winter evening. Among them is George Hurstwood, who is not looking for a warm place to stay, but a place where he can finally commit suicide. After getting a room “between the [hotel’s] bleak walls,” Hurstwood prepares to kill himself: he turns out the light and “stand[s] calmly in blackness” and takes off his “old wet . . . hat” (499). Though the originally the character the novel most associates with self-reflexivity, by the end of his devolution, Hurstwood has lost this capacity: “after a few moments in which he reviewed nothing” Hurstwood kills himself. Like many moments in the novel, Hurstwood’s loss of self-reflexivity is made strikingly literal with the reflexive act of suicide (499).

Given that Hurstwood’s suicide marks the culmination of his devolution, read in reverse, the moment can be read as an inversion of a birth scene: we witness the beginning of a biological life starting its individual evolution into “light” that emerges from dark, wet, “walls” (499). If we continue reading the scene in reverse, Hurstwood in his single room merges with a “cold, shrunken, disgruntled mass” (who also have “wet hats and wet shoulders”) outside the hotel, looking with “general interest [at] the closed door” (498-499): “they looked at it as dumb brutes look, as dogs paw and whine and study the knob” (498). Here, the movement is broadly from a single biological body to the not-fully human group, from the indoors to the outdoors. Continuing on in this way, the group, at first, appears to be of one body: “in the snow they shifted together, now on one foot, now another, almost rocking in unison” (498). And, finally, we witness not only the crowd, but the particular faces within it: one, “white as drained veal,” another “red as brick,” “not a normal, healthy face in the whole mass” (497). The group is

composed of individual bodies in conflict as members continue “edging, shifting, pushing” one another (498). Read in this counterintuitive way, the scene loosely tracks the birth of a biologically individuated body (though not an individual) in a society (i.e. the presence of the group) that seems eerily pre-human (“brutes” and “dogs”).³³

For the most part, the group of bodies remain “dumb”; the expression we do witness is in displays of force through obvious gestures: “edging, shifting, pushing” (498). The dialogue we hear, the narrator tells us, “was not conversation but a running comment directed at anyone in general” (498). In other words, what language is present is not, in any meaningful sense, shared. Whatever the case, to be a member of such a group is not to be able to communicate, much less to see those around you as not only discrete persons but persons of a particular type. Bodily signs, that is, gestures, in such a situation, are so obvious so as to not need words. But it is one thing for these gestures to be communicated to the reader and another for members of the group to understand said gestures no matter how obvious.

If we continue moving backward in time (which is also forward in individual if not social evolution), though, eventually we arrive at a moment when Hurstwood can read gestures. After Hurstwood becomes homeless, he makes his way through the Bowery asking for spare change: “he strolled about, sizing people up, but it was long before just the right face and situation arrived” (464). Most basically, “sizing people up” is reading signs on the body over a period of time (“it was long before”). These signs on the body are supposed to speak to a particular kind of character (“face”). But it must not only be “the right face,” it must also be “the right . . . situation” or context. One without the other is a misreading. Importantly, this misreading is a

³³ Elsewhere, the novel describes the group this way: “The men waited patiently, like cattle, in the coldest weather – waited for several hours before they could be admitted” (448).

matter of survival. And, the occasion to read in the first place is here rooted in the experience of necessity.

Hurstwood's attempt to read bodily signs as an indication of character is what cognitive scientists would call "theory of mind": "the biologically automatic ascription of subjecthood to another person" (Ferrington 313). In "'Oh, Blind Strivings of the Human Heart!': Theory of Mind and Human Agency in Theodor Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*," Jake Ferrington writes that, try as he might, the narrator's attempt "to undermine our interpretation of the action of the novel as springing from the free will of the characters" is damned to fail "because our brains have evolved to presuppose the existence and nature of other 'minds'" (312): "we read literary characters in nearly the same way that it happens when we 'read' the people in our social environment" (313). But, as this paper is concerned with the characters' capacity to read others for the purpose of typing them, for us, the question is not whether we can read a body ("face") without ascribing to that body character or mind ("liberal countenance"), but whether or not the characters themselves possess this ability, which is not necessarily a given. A few pages after, for example, Hurstwood, a bit later in his devolution, attempts "to think logically," though, "this was no longer possible with him" (494). By the end of the novel, he is a "brute," a "dog," a body with little indication of mind: "after a few moments in which he reviewed nothing" he commits suicide.¹ And, in between, his "mind" becomes "decayed and disjointed" (494). Begging the question, at what point in a mind's "decay" does it lose the ability to read people? Whatever the answer to this question, our evolved capacity to "'read' people" (however poorly) is not necessarily shared by the characters in the novel, in part, because it is not clear that they are recognizably human from start to finish. To be an individuated body in the novel, then, is not necessarily to be able to

“‘read’ people.” If Hurstwood’s devolution is read in reverse, this moment would seem to mark the beginning of Hurstwood’s development of a “theory of mind.”

But, Hurstwood is not just attempting to read a single face, he is trying to get at a form of knowledge that would allow him to understand all faces. After a number of rebuffs, Hurstwood has an idea: “at last it crossed his mind that there was a science of faces, and that a man could pick the liberal countenance if he tried” (464). Hurstwood’s turn of phrase, “a science of faces,” suggests that a number of empirical facts (a set of discrete faces) can be brought together in a larger whole. Where others might just see multiplicity, Hurstwood sees the coherence of a science. Given that Hurstwood begins sign reading here because he is homeless and that his ability to read signs in the first place is a product of a particular moment of biological development, this science seems to take part equally of sociology and evolutionary biology. As a science, the information about particular characters (“faces”) could be catalogued, grouped, and, most importantly, instrumentalized. Of course, as a manager, Hurstwood was previously well aware of this “science,” though now in a different “situation” (i.e. at the beginning of his devolution) had forgotten it.

Hurstwood’s “science of faces” shares more than a passing resemblance to archetypical criticism (and other forms of criticism that attempt various forms of totalizing accounts of literature and the social). From the opening pages of the novel, Carrie is presented in a series of archetypical roles: the ingénue, the kept woman, the heroine, with the specter of the fallen woman hovering over the entire text. In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye defines an archetype, like a sociological or biological type, as an instance of particularity (“the symbol in this phase is the communicable unit”) and a form or repetition that, when combined, becomes general (“a typical or recurring image. . . . a symbol which connects one poem [or text in

general] with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience. . . . it attempts to fit poems into the body of poetry as a whole”) (99). To make this sort of claim, Frye, needs to assume that there is

A coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole. . . . The first postulate of this inductive leap is the same as that of any science: the assumption of total coherence. . . . We have to adopt the hypothesis, then, that just as there is an order of nature behind the natural sciences, so literature is not a piled aggregate of “works,” but an order of words. (17)

Frye makes clear that to speak of an archetype is to posit a totality that encompasses the particular and the universal. Informed, in part, by a Deweyan conception of art, Frye suggests that this totality is not the critic imposing a framework on a work or set of works from the outside: “It is clear that criticism cannot be a systematic study unless there is a quality in literature which enables it to be so” (18). “Until criticism makes” the “discovery” of this totality and studies these connections, Frye, sounding a lot like Zola, says that criticism “has not been born as an individual science but remains an embryo within the body of some other subject. The birth of physics from ‘natural philosophy’ and of sociology from ‘moral philosophy’ will illustrate the process” (17). Lest we mistake Frye’s assumption of totality found in “an order of words” as just a version of a linguistic sublime, Frye makes clear that “the archetypal view of literature shows us literature as a total form and literary experience as a *part of the continuum of life*” (115; emphasis added). Frye further notes, “as the archetype is the communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication” (99). Bringing together “social fact” and “mode of communication,” literary archetypes are, at once, formal and social, the product of language and matter, word and world. *Sister Carrie* is similarly drawn to organicist explanations of the relation between word and world.

Thus, though Carrie is presented as the archetypal ingénue from the opening pages of the novel, that archetype is formal and social. The trope originated with Voltaire's *L'Ingénu*, a satire that gets its teeth from placing a "child of nature" in polite society, resulting in a mockery of various social and religious conventions. While more aligned with the ingénue as the "artless, innocent girl or young woman," Carrie, a "natural mind . . . rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis," is certainly presented as a "child of nature" in the novel (4). At the start of the novel, Carrie, "rather a sweet little being, with large eyes and a sad mouth" (50), is "eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (3). Carrie's "ignorance," "youth," and "wonder," are written on her body and made literal in her wide-eyes (10): "something childlike in her large eyes" (105). The peculiarity of the ingénue type, as these quotes make clear, is that it is a form that is defined by its relationship to knowledge ("ignorance"), futurity ("youth"), and its formlessness (in that it is not fully developed). To become formed, she must leave her home. Carrie, like many an ingénue after her, migrates from "the green environs of the village" to the city (in this case Chicago) (3): "fresh from the air of the village, the light of the country still in her eye" (122). The narrator tells us that "in 1889 Chicago had the peculiar qualifications of growth which made such adventuresome pilgrimages even on the part of young girls plausible. Its many and growing commercial opportunities gave it widespread fame, which made of it a giant magnet, drawing to itself, from all quarters, the hopeful and the hopeless" (15-16). Yet, Carrie's migration to the city is not altogether chosen: the "city . . . was . . . a magnet for her".

Here, the literary archetype of the ingénue and the sociological type of the female migrant start to blend together. "Whatever touch of regret at parting characterized her thoughts," the narrator tells us, "it was certainly not for advantages now being given up. . . . she was a fair

example of the middle American class—two generations removed from the emigrant” (4). For Carrie (and perhaps for her grandparents as well), migration (and therefore the entrance of the ingénue) emerges out of a desire for opportunity not found in the village: “whatever touch of regret at parting characterized her thoughts, it was certainly not for advantages now being given up.”

Not only is the literary archetype of the ingénue indistinguishable from the sociological type of the female migrant here, but the entrance of the literary type is, materially determined by “forces wholly superhuman” (4), whether those be biological (“a natural mind”), mechanistic (the “city . . . was . . . a magnet for her”), or social (“it was certainly not for advantages now being given up”). Though the slippage between or conflation of multiple determinisms makes the nature of that determinism difficult to disentangle at this point, it is nevertheless clear from the novel’s first moments that these “forces” nevertheless constrain the possibilities available to Carrie and to the ingénue more broadly both in this particular moment and hereafter). The entrance of the type of the ingénue in the novel and the justification to even begin this *bildungsroman*, as presented here, is nothing less than “necessity” (24).

Before even arriving in Chicago, Carrie’s class position and lack of experience will get exploited. On the train, Carrie becomes “conscious of a man behind. She felt him observing her mass of hair . . . she felt a certain interest growing in that quarter” (4). We learn that the man “observing her” is one Charles Drouet, another combination of literary and social type: he was “a type of the traveling canvasser for a manufacturing house – a class which at the time was first being dubbed by the slang of the day ‘drummers’”; and, despite his attempt to give Carrie the

nickname, “Cad,” such a nickname is simply a projection of his own type, “the cad,” or, as the novel introduces us to him, the “masher”³⁴ (5).

These two types, the ingénue and the cad, the female migrant and “the drummer,” are drawn together here through a pushing and pulling mechanism, attraction: Drouet’s sexual attraction to Carrie, and Carrie’s attraction to the “daring and magnetism of the individual, born of past experiences and triumphs” as well as his “purse, the shiny tan shoes, the smart new suit, and the *air* with which he did things, built up for her a dim world of fortune, of which he was the centre [*sic*]” (4, 8-9). Drouet’s “magnetism” and “*air*” is indistinguishable from his material refinements and his supposed remove from the realm of necessity, which Carrie wants so badly to escape. His refinements, like his “dress,” are so striking to Carrie that they “cause her to study her own,” which “makes her conscious of an inequality” between them (7).

³⁴ The narrator, whose most striking feature is his impulse to give a totalizing account of everything (large or small, no matter how obvious), in the course of a single page, takes note of every feature of Drouet’s outfit, classifies Drouet in his social and literary type, informs us about the origin of the term “masher” (a “newer term which had sprung into general use among Americans in 1880”) (5), and makes sure that we know, if for some reason “this order of individual should permanently pass,” the key features of that type: “Good clothes, of course, were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing. A strong physical nature, actuated by a keen desire for the feminine, was the next. . . . an insatiable love of variable pleasure – woman – pleasure” (6). The narrator’s impulse to document everything, in part, derives from ways in which sociology and literature get fundamentally confused in naturalist novels, which, this one included, often read like case studies. In this instance, though, the narrator’s impulse to document everything is particularly concerned not only with type, but with the possibility that such a type “should permanently pass.” On one level, providing the socio-historical context in which a type emerges seems completely in keeping with the naturalist novel’s likeness to and investment in sociological thinking. But, on another, what the narrator is ultimately worrying about is that the same moment he fixes Drouet’s character in language and time as a type (that is, the moment he objectifies Drouet into a type in a concrete setting), is the same moment that said fixing is revealed to be unstable. Yet, these two levels are not in conflict as the worry over the moment of objectification (that whatever version of fixing in time is unstable) is simply a manifestation of sociological thought’s tendency to be both abstract and concrete in its attempt to make the social world legible. Read symptomatically, the desire to fix in time is an acknowledgment of multiplicity and a defense against flux. The source of this instability is not simply the product of a word’s failure “to mean” exactly, but related to the sense that type is itself the product of conversion (from general to particular, from particular to general, from concrete to abstract and from abstract to concrete) at a particular moment in history.

What is most interesting about Carrie's appraisal of Drouet (her first attempt at reading people in the novel), though, is that she reads him as a distinct character, one with an unmistakable allure, because (1) she does not know how to type him and (2) she does have a very definite idea of what wealth would be like.³⁵ Carrie's lack of definite idea of what wealth would be like makes Drouet inscrutable "a dim world of fortune, of which he was the centre [*sic*]." To be a distinct character, here, is to be inscrutable, to see the parts (daring and magnetism . . . [his] purse, the shiny tan shoes, the smart new suit, and the *air* with which he did things") as adding up to a whole (the individual), but one that she is unable to fully comprehend. Drouet is legible to Carrie to the extent that he is an aggregate (the sum of his parts), but the relation of those parts to the whole and the relation of his person to those of a similar kind remains a mystery to her. In short, Carrie reads Drouet as a realist character when he is only known to us as a type. Carrie is thus mystified by Drouet due to reading him as a distinct realist character that lives in "a dim world of fortune."

Sensing rightly that Carrie is drawn to material refinements, the drummer, Charles Drouet attempts to "lur[e]" her in with discussions of "sales of clothing, his travels, Chicago and the amusements of that city. . . . So much to see—theatres, crowds, fine houses" (7, 9). Chicago, as Drouet describes it to Carrie, is a place of spectacle. While this description, again, makes clear the difference between Carrie's life of necessity and Drouet's supposed remove from that sort of life, it also more simply suggests that Drouet thinks Carrie might like the theatre. Drouet apparently continues on in this vein as "she could not help smiling as he told her of some popular actress she reminded him of" (7-8). While, no doubt, an attempt at flattery, Drouet is here, most basically, insisting on a likeness between the distinct person beside him, Carrie, and another he

³⁵ There is a further question in the novel if wealth actually looks like anything.

has supposedly seen on the stage. Further, to make this sort of claim, Drouet must not only notice likeness, but, out of that likeness, unify both under a particular type, which is, of course, the opposite of how Carrie reads him. Drouet, here, has more familiarity with the “science of faces” than Carrie.

Given that all Drouet really knows about Carrie is that she is leaving home for the first time to travel to the city of Chicago (and that he later gets her the part of the ingénue in an amateur play), there is some evidence to suggest that he is typecasting Carrie as the ingénue. Later this is made even more explicit as he suggests Carrie might be good at the part of the ingénue in a local production of a melodrama. The ingénue would certainly be the ideal type for the cad to pursue.

Like the theatre manager, Drouet, true to type, attempts to instrumentalize the information he learns about Carrie as a means to “lur[e]” her (9). This exchange, based on an uneven access to resources and unequal access to information (Drouet drawing on his “past experiences”), necessarily translates into an imbalance in the power dynamic of their relationship from its inception: Carrie “felt that she had yielded something—he, that he had gained a victory. Already they felt that they were somehow associated. Already he took control in *directing* the conversation” (9) (emphasis added). The narrator’s repetition of “Already” makes clear that this is certainly not the last time that Drouet will use the information he acquired in the conversation to “gain[] a victory” and make her “yield[] something.” Though Carrie becomes conscious of “an inequality” between them and vaguely understands “that she had yielded something,” her awareness as of yet does not include an awareness of being typed (and therefore used) in this early scene.

As the type of the ingénue continues to be determined by necessity, when Carrie arrives in Chicago the type of the female migrant is always already the female migrant job-seeker and renter. Shortly after arriving, Minnie (Carrie's sister), takes her to their "flat . . . in a part of West Van Buren Street which was inhabited by families of laborers and clerks" (12). Lest we assume that "Carrie's coming to live with" Minnie and her husband, Hanson, was a show of altruism by the couple, the narrator tells us that this "would have been prevented by his stolid disapproval if it had not been tacitly understood beforehand that she was to get work and pay her board. . . . with her paying four each week, he figured out that it would not be a bad investment" (12-13). And, if that was not clear enough, Hanson almost immediately tells Carrie where she should inquire about employment. The interior of the apartment (which is both cramped and composed of people who do not really want her around) acts as a repulsive force. Thus, the next day Carrie ventures out: "Once across the river and into the wholesale district, she glanced about her for some likely door at which to apply. As she contemplated the wide windows and imposing signs, she became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was—a wage-seeker" (18, 22).

At this point, Carrie develops a new form of consciousness: "she became conscious of being gazed upon and understood for what she was—a wage-seeker." This form of consciousness, a form of self-typing, is the result of the realization that she is "being gazed upon" (that is, made into an image or object) "and understood for what she was": a sociological type. Interestingly, this awareness is not based on 'inward' reflection. Instead, this awareness arises out of venturing out into the world of commerce: "into the wholesale district, she glanced about her for some likely door at which to apply. . . . she contemplated the wide windows and imposing signs." Walking through "the wholesale district," she looks around her and, upon

“contemplate[s]” a world that is simultaneously material (“some likely door . . . wide windows”) and semiotic (“imposing signs”). Tellingly, Carrie literally thinking about the relation of “signs” and the material world when she begins reading others reading her. Being recognized as “what she was” here is Carrie’s awareness of herself as a type. Yet, it is unclear whether she considers being typed in this way a loss of her distinctness. We might read this moment either as an indication that Carrie is, from the first, a type with no self to lose in becoming a type or, in the Spencerian sense, as the movement from homogeneity to differentiation occasioned here, by the division of labor. These ultimately mount to the same thing as the ingénue is a type defined by its homogeneity that inevitably becomes differentiated. This first instance of self-typing does not take a high degree of subtlety in her reading abilities as the type is fairly obvious.

Nevertheless, this act of recognition, aligned with the dictates of necessity, is powerful enough to occasion a change in type. At the end of a long day of looking for a job, Carrie, “sick at heart and in body, . . . turned to the west, the direction of Minnie’s flat, which she had now fixed in mind, and began that wearisome, baffled retreat which the seeker for employment at night fall too often makes” (27). Though going back to the apartment was “fixed in [her] mind,” upon passing a “wholesale shoe house,” Carrie has “one of those forlorn impulses which often grow out of a *fixed* sense of defeat, the last sprouting of a baffled growth of ideas, seized upon her” (27-28; emphasis added). Carrie is not consciously intending to inquire at other places about employment, but does so when a set of “impulses . . . seized upon her.” Her extension in time combined with the sight of the “shoe house” create “impulses” she has no say in; in the language of “reflex action,” these impressions are stronger than her desire to return to the “flat.”

It is out of these “impulses” that emerge at a particular moment at a particular place that the ‘new’ (“sprouting of a baffled growth of ideas”) organically emerges from the “fixed.” When

she ventures inside to ask about employment, Carrie tells “the middle-aged gentleman sitting at a small desk” that she just “wants something to do” (28). Her desire for an occupation is quite general at this point. “The middle-aged gentleman,” by contrast, asks, “what kind of work is it you want—you’re not a typewriter, are you” (28)? For the man at the desk, occupations are particular (“a typewriter”) and general (a “kind” or type). Like Drouet and the theatre manager, the man at the desk approaches the world as a set of types based on the information one has (a combination of position, experience, reading bodies, and words). The man at the desk, too, is in the position of being able to offer Carrie a job or not. Carrie, meanwhile, arrives in the shop as a result of necessity and “impulse.” As discussed, her understanding of the world is “felt.” She has not, as of yet, learned to read the world primarily as a set of types or words, both of which come together in the pun “typewriter.”

Yet, she quickly learns that the nature of “something to do” matters as the job she acquires in a shoe factory is demeaning and physically debilitating. At work, Carrie is constantly watched to make sure she performs her tasks efficiently: “the foreman passed slowly along, eyeing each worker distinctly. . . . she felt the eyes of the other upon her and troubled lest she was not working fast enough. . . . she went excitedly on, hardly breathing until the shadow moved away from behind her” (37-38). Here, Carrie’s labor is figured as a kind of performance with an audience. In this case, the male audience has all of the power, the ability to fire her or let her continue working. However, Carrie loses her job almost as quickly as she found it because she has no money to afford a winter coat consequently she gets sick. Predictably, this puts a strain on her relationship with her sister and brother-in-law so much so that Hanson makes it apparent that he wants Carrie to go home if she cannot pay rent, prompting her to go out looking for a job as soon as she is well enough to do so.

It is under this strain that Carrie sees “the drummer” again. Upon running into Drouet in the street, Carrie immediately “felt so relieved in his radiant presence, so much looked after and cared for” that she agreed to have lunch with him (58). At lunch, the two discuss Carrie’s loss of her job and the possibility that she might have to return home. Throughout, Drouet draws attention to the worst parts of Carrie’s situation, whether it be the fact that she had to work in a factory to survive (“you oughtn’t be working for those people”) (59), the minimal pay of the factory (“you can’t live on it, can you?” (60), the loss of her job (“you lost your place because you got sick” (60), or the prospect of having to return home if she cannot find a way to make a living in Chicago on her own (“what can you do alone? . . . you can’t make it”) (61). At this, “they came to an understanding of each other without words – he of her situation, she of the fact that he realised [*sic*] it” (60).

After drawing attention to the problem (most notably, that she will likely not be able to stay in Chicago if something does not change quickly), true to type, the salesman offers a solution:

“Let me help you”. . . . Then he slipped the greenbacks he had into her palm, and when she began to protest, he whispered: “I’ll loan it to you – that’s all right. I’ll loan it to you.” He made her take it. . . . “You needn’t worry about taking it. You can get yourself a nice room by yourself. I won’t hurt you.” (61, 69)

In part, Carrie does see Drouet’s offer in the way he intends, as a solution to her problems: “ah, money, money, money! What a thing it was to have. How plenty of it would clear away all these troubles” (66). But Carrie realizes that Drouet’s offer is more complicated than this: “Carrie saw the drift, but could not express her thoughts. She felt more than ever the helplessness of her case. . . . She felt bound to him by a strange tie of affection now” (61, 69). With money and a place to stay, Carrie is free of some of her “troubles,” but with that solution comes “a strange tie” to Drouet. Though unable to “express her thoughts,” Carrie has the “felt” sense that there is more

on offer than the exact content of Drouet's words and that this offer would not end her sense of "helplessness," but transform it. Still, she is unable to articulate that this transformation will be from the struggle of trying to make a living independently to being resigned to being dependent on a male for survival with the tacit assumption that her new "situation" would entail a different sort of exchange: shelter, food, and money for sex. Again, this interaction only makes sense if there is a pre-existing uneven distribution of resources along gendered lines. And again, Drouet uses the information he acquires about her situation (one grounded in necessity) to exploit her. In this scene, which contains multiple references to the theatre, Drouet again typecasts Carrie. But, this typecasting is of a slightly different kind, or more precisely, brings out an additional dynamic within typecasting.

While on the train, Drouet had cast Carrie as an ingénue based on her likeness to another actress and unifies both under a particular type, in this later scene, his typecasting of Carrie is an attempt to convert her into a new type with obvious literary and sociological significance: the kept woman. As all types are a kind of conversion (for example, "the conversion of individuals into numbers and cases") (Seltzer 100), this is, in effect, a conversion of a conversion. Drouet's aim throughout the scene, as on the train, is to be able to direct her ("the influence he was exerting was powerful") actions "to gain[] a victory" and make her "yield[] something." In the end, she does just this. Confronted with "the helplessness of her case" while "under the influence of a good dinner and Drouet's radiating presence," Carrie ultimately finds "the scheme proposed" to be "feasible" (70). During the discussion, the narrator tells us that the "influence he was exerting was powerful. . . . His fine success as a salesman lay in his geniality" (61, 63). Drouet's attempt to convert Carrie from type to type, the narrator implies, is, in part, a result of

his ability to convert sales. Determined both by necessity and Drouet's "influence," Carrie is converted from one sociological type to another (70).

Interestingly, as a literary archetype, though, Carrie retains some features of the ingénue. The novel suggests that there is a kind of lag between sociological and literary archetype because, (1), in being typecast for a particular kind of role means that it tends to stick over time, not necessarily correlating with one's success, and, (2), in the case of the ingénue, specifically, type is simultaneously the description of a person ("An artless, innocent girl or young woman"), a role ("the representation of such a character on the stage"), or the person playing it ("the actress who plays the part"). These three levels of the ingénue in the novel end up correlating with Carrie's growing awareness of herself as a type at various stages of development, and therefore the possibility of transcending type.

Carrie's new living arrangement can be understood as a kind of reversal. When the narrator returns to Carrie and Drouet sometime later, we find the two living together in a furnished three-bedroom apartment "in Ogden Place, facing Union Park, on the West Side." "In the view of a certain stratum of society," the narrator tells us, "Carrie was comfortably established – in the eyes of the starveling, beaten by every wind and gusty sheet of rain, she was safe in a halcyon harbour [*sic*]" (88). Which is to say, for some, Carrie's new position would be viewed as divorced from the constraints of necessity as she is now "established in a pleasant fashion, free of certain difficulties which most ominously confronted her" (89). Instead of getting a cold because she cannot afford a coat, Carrie now has a nice wardrobe. And, instead of living in the Hansons' cramped apartment on Van Buren Street where she faced potential eviction, Carrie's place feels more secure and her residence more spacious and refined: "the place maintained an air pleasing in the extreme. . . . It afforded a vista pleasant to contemplate. The

best room looked out upon the lawn of [Union] park, now sear and brown, where a little lake lay sheltered. . . . There was a large pier-glass mirror between the two windows” (88). Carrie is drawn to this “vista,” where she sits in her rocking chair on this threshold between inside and outside, a space where she can see, but maintain a distance from the city, which, at the same time encompasses her. Such is the position of the kept woman in miniature. Looking out from inside of the apartment, the city becomes simultaneously material and aesthetic. At the same time, while Carrie is sitting in her rocking chair looking outward, the “large pier-glass mirror between the two windows” faces the interior, reflecting her own image back to her.

Given Carrie’s positioning here, it should perhaps be unsurprising this space sparks different kinds of reflection. The narrator tells us that after attending several plays with Drouet, Carrie,

seeing the airy grace of the ingénue in several well-constructed plays, . . . had been moved to secretly imitate it, and many were the little movements and expressions of the body in which she indulged from time to time in the privacy of her chamber. On several occasions, when Drouet had caught her admiring herself, as he imagined, in the mirror, she was doing nothing more than recalling some little grace of the mouth or the eyes which she had witnessed in another. . . it was nothing more than the first subtle outcroppings of an artistic nature, endeavouring [*sic*] to re-create the perfect likeness of some phase of beauty which appealed to her. (157)

At the mirror, Carrie’s image is reflected. Carrie has brought some of the outside world back into the apartment. But, here, though Carrie is still not, strictly speaking, the author of her actions (“she had been moved to secretly imitate it”), she does somewhat successfully incorporate the outside world. For imitation, as depicted here, begins not with semantic language, but with gestures of the body, likening first foray into acting to that of the melodrama actress. The first step in transformation, here, is, like her own determined position, material. Just as importantly, as we will see, imitation and acting in the novel are not outside of nature or even aligned with

artifice; rather, acting and the mimetic impulse in general are the product of a certain phase of biological development and are therefore as natural as anything else. At one point, Drouet tells Carrie, “Just act as you do around here. Be natural” (156). Like being cast as the ingénue, Carrie is not the author of her actions here, but the specific ways in which she is not arise from a different source: a desire to imitate what she has seen outside the apartment. Instead of the girl on the train with no exposure to the world of the theatre and that of the city in general, Carrie’s desire and nominal participation in the world (a kept woman whose few trips outside the apartment are often to the theatre) enables a new form of participation in the world and integration of it.

But, most importantly, what is reflected in the mirror is a type: the ingénue. To be clear, this is not the same as simply being the ingénue (“an artless, innocent girl or young woman”), being typecast as the ingénue, or seeing the ingénue as an object of knowledge (“the representation of such a character on the stage”). Rather, it is to see the ingénue as an object of knowledge, a type, and imitate it (“the actress who plays the part”). It is to see one’s type as a type and therefore to gain awareness, and the possibility of transcending it: “to re-create” the type, to witness “the first subtle outcroppings of an artistic nature.” Though Carrie is, in some ways, imitating herself, this understanding is incomplete if it does not acknowledge that her imitation is, at the same time, imitation of an ideal: the type as such rather than a single member that is included under the rubric of that type (“the perfect likeness of some phase of beauty”). Yet, this recognition, however partial, fails to produce a difference in her material situation.

In terms of “reflex action,” the impression of recognition does not here outweigh the dictates of necessity. At the mirror, Carrie is saddled “with many new [difficulties] which were of a mental order. . . . She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had seen

before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world's opinions, and saw a worse" (89). At first glance, this moment seems to be an almost too literal embodiment of Charles Cooley's idea of the "looking-glass-self": the body, though subject to change, is coherent over time; too, her impression of herself is a mirror of the world that can nominally be evaluated. But, as the scene goes on, this is not assured. Rather than a coherent self, the narrator tells us that Carrie "might well have been a new and different individual" (89).

Moreover, as the scene progresses, what seems to be a sense of self seems to disintegrate the moment it attempts to become vocal. At first, she hears the voice of "an average little conscience, a thing which represented the world, her past environment, habit, convention, in a confused way . . . somewhat clear in utterance at first, but never wholly convincing" (89). "Conscience," separable enough to literally speak on its own behalf pleads for Carrie to "escape" (91). But, soon the voice becomes more honest about what that would mean: "Out, woman. Into the streets. Preferably be wretched" (91). Instead of being able to choose whether or not to follow the voice of "conscience" (like many a protagonist of *bildungsroman*), this voice is "answer[ed]" and superseded: "always the December days threatened. She was alone; she was desireful [*sic*]; she was fearful of the whistling wind. The voice of want made answer for her. . . . Our logic is bare of the voice of the wind. How potent is the answer a pang of hunger makes to the cry. 'Be good.' How subtle is the influence of a dreary atmosphere" (90-91). In terms of "reflex action," "the voice of want" creates the stronger impression. However, even "the voice of want," separable from her, though speaking for her is not successfully incorporated. And, as these voices overwhelm the voice of "conscience" and "convention," Carrie is neither becoming successfully integrated into the social world nor positioning herself into relation to it. Instead, there is a short-circuit in the process that would allow her to make a meaningful decision, to

learn, and to act accordingly. Hers is a still a world of necessity: “we are insects produced by heat, and pass without it” (91). The path of ‘the good’ is either unavailable to her, or, what amounts to the same thing, irrelevant. If we are still tempted to pass judgment on her desire for material things, the narrator tells us that Carrie’s desire to consume is rooted in an (always failed) attempt to keep necessity at bay: “if our streets were not strung with signs of gorgeous hues and thronged with hurrying purchasers, we would quickly discover how firmly the chill hand of winter lays upon the heart” (90). And, instead of ‘reflection’ leading to some sort of enlightenment, awareness, or even the necessary tools to make sense of the basic facts of the situation, “she had not the mind to get hold upon a definite truth” (91-92). So, “when she could not find her way out of the labrynth [*sic*] of illogic which thought upon the subject created, she would turn away entirely” (91-92).

But, before Carrie ultimately “find[s] her way out of the labrynth [*sic*] of illogic,” learns what is happening to her, and is able to take meaningful action, she is mystified by yet another lover; like Drouet, George Hurstwood is simultaneously a sociological and literary archetype: a manager and a gentleman. Though, from the moment we are introduced to him, his last name, which indicates the end of a kind of nobility (dead-wood), signals his eventual reversal of fortune and the transformation of his type into the fallen man. However, when we meet Hurstwood, we learn that he is still “a very successful and well-known man about town” whose “position” as manager with “Fitzgerald and Moy was fixed” (83). The first source of Hurstwood’s success is that, as a good manager, he has trained his staff to anticipate and fulfill his wishes without his verbalized command: “The bartender saw his action however and signaled with his hands. ‘It’s on the manager,’ he said, smiling merrily. Hurstwood had them so trained that they knew” (46). The second source of his success is that he can greet his customers on a “finely graduated scale

of informality and friendship, which improved from the ‘How do you do?’ addressed to the fifteen-dollar-a-week clerks and office attaches, who, by long frequenting of the place, became aware of his position, to the ‘Why, old man, how are you?’ which he addressed to those noted or rich individuals who knew him and were inclined to be friendly” (44). At each level of the scale, Hurstwood is capable of mirroring his patrons: “reflecting in his personality the ambitions of those who greeted him” (180). And, his final source of success in his career is that “Hurstwood looked the part, for, besides being slightly under forty, he had a good, stout constitution, an active manner, and a solid, substantial air, which was composed in part of his fine clothes, his clean linen, his jewels, and, above all, his own sense of his importance” (43). In his finely tuned social graces, his care to make an excellent self-presentation, and his ability to communicate his wishes without words, the manager is likened to an actor (and an experienced one at that): “Hurstwood looked the part.”

Just as Drouet had typecast Carrie and used his sales skills to convert Carrie from one type to another (the ingénue to the kept woman), Hurstwood similarly uses his skills that he learned in the marketplace and what he knows about Carrie’s situation (that she is a kept woman) to take advantage of her. Hurstwood, “who was capable of strong feelings – often poetic ones”(128), uses a number of tools in the actor’s tool kit from his eyes (“He would raise his eyes slowly in smiling emphasis of something, and she was fixed by their magnetism”) (117), to his voice (he “modulated his voice to such a degree that what he said seemed wholly confidential”) (117), to reading the body language of other unwitting players (“he thought he saw in her drooping eye, her unstable glance, her wavering manner, the symptoms of a budding passion. . . . he wanted to find out . . . what the next sign of feeling for him would what the next sign of

feeling for him would be” (124). And, most importantly, he portrays himself as an object of pity and enlists her sympathy:

“I am practically alone. There is nothing in my life that is pleasant or delightful. . . . I know too much of the world”. . . . As he said this, Hurstwood really imagined that his state was pitiful. He had the ability to get off at a distance and view himself objectively--of seeing what he wanted to see in the things which made up his existence.

Hurstwood’s self-reflexivity here (the self returning to itself) enables him to not only act but reflect on that acting the moment that he does so, to be both actor and audience. This self-reflexivity, the mark of the realist actor, is here used to create a performance in a genre that he knows Carrie likes: melodrama. According to Hurstwood, being a member of what the narrator calls the “American upper class--the first grade below the luxuriously rich” and having experience (“He was like every man who has had the advantage of practice and knows he has sympathy”) is a sad affair. Both of these, of course, end up enabling him to take advantage of her. Though, Carrie’s arrangement with Drouet is premised on the exchange of sex for material goods (both of which come together in Carrie being a kept woman), Hurstwood acts as if their relationship falls outside such vulgar concerns unbeknownst to Carrie that he just intends to use her for sex come what may. Hurstwood thus exhibits a fairly reckless disregard for what might happen to her (that is, for her to become a fallen woman) were he to pursue his own pleasure at her expense. Though Carrie interprets his confession of love as a sincere plea to be together as a couple, the narrator tells us: “what his intentions were we may readily guess from our knowledge of men. Many individuals are so constituted that their only thought is to obtain pleasure and shun responsibility” (132).

Yet, Hurstwood and his performance remain utterly mystifying for Carrie: “here was its greatest mystery, the man of money and affairs, sitting beside her—appealing to her It

affected her as much as the magnificence of God affects the mind of the Christian when he reads of His wondrous state and finds at the end an appeal to come and make it perfect” (128-29).

Hurstwood’s performance, though aligned more with of artifice than Carrie’s “natural” imitations, is effective as he is able to bring together the information he has about her (that she is already a kept woman) and his skills as a manager to create the intended result: to convert Carrie from Drouet’s mistress to his “own girl.” In part, Carrie’s reading of Hurstwood is more accurate than her initial reading of Drouet because Hurstwood actually more of a realist character Drouet. Still, the results that follow have similar material consequences. As Carrie cannot see past the artifice, by the end of the conversation, Carrie has become Hurstwood’s “own girl.” However, the propositions of her lovers (and their claims to ‘ownership’) begin to become undone as Carrie enters the world of the stage.

After discovering that his local Elk’s club will be sponsoring an amateur production of Augustin Daly’s melodrama, “Under The Gaslight,” Drouet comes home with another “proposition”; forever intent on typecasting, Drouet tells Carrie that she would be great for the part of Laura in the play. “The part of Laura,” Carrie learns, “was one of suffering and tears. . . . true to the most sacred traditions of melodrama The sorrowful demeanor, the tremelo [*sic*] music, the long, explanatory, cumulative addresses, all were there” (160-161). Melodrama is, of course, the stage genre most associated type. Like Laura, Carrie’s real identity (a mistress rather than the wife of her lovers) is constantly on the verge of being discovered, though she remains the heroine. Given these similarities, it is unsurprising that Drouet thinks Carrie, a “natural,” would play the part well. When Drouet informs her about the part, Carrie “was . . . very much drawn toward the proposition” and “pleased to think he would ask. Her eyes brightened, for if there was anything that enlisted her sympathies it was the art of the stage” (155). Insofar as this

moment is just another of Drouet's "proposition[s]" (gesturing once again to the relation between typecasting and propositioning), it is one that, unknown to Drouet, will ultimately undo the original "propositions" (both Drouet's and Hurstwood's, though the latter takes more time).

This moment further makes clear that Carrie's incorporation of the world, her natural ability, her often failed reflection, and her determined character are all of a piece:

she was created with that passivity of soul which is always the mirror of the active world . . . Carrie was possessed of that sympathetic, impressionable nature which . . . has been the glory of the drama . . . Her impressionable feelings were the actor's own – her lack of initiative and decision were also characteristic of the tribe. In short, she could feel without reasoning therefrom. (158)

In this telling, to be an actor is not to be an active agent that brings themselves to a particular role, or to study handbooks and taken classes, or even to reflect on what one has seen on the stage and then to "reason" how such an effect might be recreated: "even without practice, she could sometimes restore dramatic situations she had witnessed by re-creating, before her mirror, the expressions of the various faces taking part in the scene" (157). Instead, acting is the result of "innate taste for imitation and . . . ability"; the ability to act is an endowment of nature. Instead, the world remains "active" while the actor is passive, an "impressionable . . . mirror" that fails to make a meaningful "decision." In short, Carrie is not an escape from still natural and social "forces," but is just a particular phase of that determinism.

Fittingly, Dreiser has Carrie's first role be in a melodrama, the stage genre most invested in type and is therefore one aligned with the naturalist relation of character and world. As such, in the play, Carrie continues to be treated as an "object" in a world of "necessity": "she dawned upon the audience, handsome and proud, shifting, with the necessity of the situation, to a cold, white, helpless object, as the social pack moved away from her scornfully" (185). Throughout the performance, Carrie continues to be directed by her lovers: "Hurstwood fixed his eye on

Carrie, as if to hypnotise [*sic*] her into doing better. He was pouring determination of his own in her direction” from his box seats while Drouet actually goes backstage to direct her to “do the trick. . . . as you showed me. . . . He really did think that Carrie had acted this particular scene very well, and he wanted her to repeat it in public” (184). As before, Carrie continues to be influenced by her lovers in one way or another here (with Drouet even gesturing once again to the relation between prostitution and her roles). But, here, the influence starts to work the other direction as well; as Carrie gives her performance, “Hurstwood began to feel a deep sympathy for her and for himself. He could almost feel that she was talking to him. . . . Pathos has this quality, that it seems ever addressed to one alone” (189). Hurstwood interprets Carrie’s words as a direct appeal to him.

While Hurstwood’s response to Carrie’s performance is, once again, a feeling of ownership (“he felt a keen delight in realizing [*sic*] that she was his”), this moment (which occurs even before the two live together) marks the beginning of Carrie’s long trek to independence, the alteration of the power of their relationship, a new form of awareness, and eventually the overcoming of type that the stage will ultimately offer her. However, in this first outing, Carrie only momentarily gets the upper hand in their relationship:

The little actress was in fine feather. She was realizing [*sic*] now what it was to be petted. For once she was the admired, the sought-for. The independence of success now made its first faint showing. With the tables turned, she was looking down, rather than up, to her lover. She did not fully realise [*sic*] that this was so, but there was something in condescension coming from her which was infinitely sweet.” (193)

Yet, after the performance, Carrie becomes a kept woman again only this time, with Hurstwood in New York. Upon arrival, the two get a nice apartment. Like Carrie and Drouet’s apartment in Chicago, this apartment also has a view, this time of Central Park and “the Hudson, a glimpse of which was to be had out of the west windows” (307). After a year of living together,

the narrator tells us, Hurstwood, “drew this peculiar conclusion”: “that [Carrie] was of the thoroughly domestic type of mind . . . that her chief expression in life was finding its natural channel in household duties. Notwithstanding the fact that he had observed her act in Chicago, and that during the past year he had only seen her limited in her relations to her flat and him by conditions which he made” (316). That is, Hurstwood reads the source of what he takes to be Carrie’s type, the kept woman (a “thoroughly domestic type of mind”), as simply the product of nature (“natural channel”) rather than the result of “conditions which he made.” He also mistakes the effect that acting has had on Carrie, again, forgetting the profound affect her acting had on him, and how his own acting has been integral to his success in business and in their ‘relationship.’ “With . . . a feeling of satisfaction in having a wife that could be content,” Hurstwood’s “thoughts of entertaining her, leading her out into the shine and show of life, grew less and less. . . . He felt attracted to that outer world but did not think she would care to go along. Once he went to the theatre alone” (315-16). Carrie is more than understanding about how Hurstwood chooses to spend his time away (“she gave him credit for having the usual allurements of men – people to talk to, places to stop, friends to consult with. She was perfectly willing that he should enjoy himself in his way”) (316), “but she did not care to be neglected herself” (316), especially “after the novelty of her surroundings wore off and the flat had become a very pleasant but no longer remarkable thing” (317). When she is rarely permitted to leave the apartment with her neighbor, Mrs. Vance, “the glamour of the high life of the city . . . seized her completely” (346). Though Mrs. Vance “taught [Carrie] how to dress and where to go,” Hurstwood’s career has moved from “fixed” in Chicago, to stable (though far less lucrative) in New York to unemployed (346). In addition to being confined to the apartment most of the time, Carrie sees evidence of more wealth than she had previously at the same time that she

experiences increasing financial constraints: “The more circumscribed became her state, the more entrancing seemed this other. And now poverty threatened to seize her entirely and to remove this other world” (346).

When faced with the wealth of others and male mobility, on the one hand, and financial and gendered spatial constraints, on the other, Carrie ‘decides’ to try to get a job as an actress. We learn what the theatre and being an actress represents to Carrie earlier in the novel when she rehearses for her performance in Chicago: “the chamber of diamonds and delight . . . opened for her as if of its own She could not help thinking what a delight this would be if it would endure, how perfect a state, if she could only do well now, and then sometime get a place as a real actress,” allowing her “to be rid of idleness and the drag of loneliness – to be doing and rising – to be admired, petted, raised to a state where all was applause, elegance, assumption of dignity” (177). In short, being an actress will give her everything she does not as a kept woman (though she would not use these words or understand herself as a type as of yet) who is dependent on a male and forever butting up against the constraints of necessity: wealth created through her own independent efforts, recognition in public, excitement, companionship, work, “rising,” and “assumption of dignity.” While Carrie loses a good deal of this idealism about the possibilities of the theatre, it nevertheless continues to represent a kind of inversion of her life as a kept woman it changes her experience of necessity and the relation of public and private.

After Hurstwood loses his job, Carrie’s desire to get a job as an actress is again the result of necessity: “It’s better than going hungry” (378). For Hurstwood, this plan is objectionable on two grounds. First, Hurstwood “did not believe any more, after three years of observation, that Carrie would ever do anything great in that line. She seemed too simple, too yielding. His idea of the art,” perhaps reflecting his own facility with the craft, “was that it involved something more

pompous. . . . Strangely, he had not conceived well of her mental ability. That was because he did not understand the nature of emotional greatness. He had never learned that a person might be emotionally – instead of intellectually – great” (377-78). Second, for Hurstwood, acting is “not much of a profession for a woman” (377), by which he means, “if Carrie tried to get on the stage she would fall into the hands of some cheap manager and become like the rest of them. He had a good idea of what he meant by *them*. Carrie was pretty. She would get along all right, but where would he be?” (377-78). At first, it seems that what is objectionable about Carrie returning to the theatre is the general association of actresses with prostitutes we find throughout the novel (“He had a good idea of what he meant by *them*”). But, this objection is not, strictly speaking, a puritanical one or even that Carrie would be so associated (“Carrie was pretty. She would get along all right). Rather, it is that acting is a “profession” that would give her the freedom to leave the home, earn a wage, and interact with other men, rendering him superfluous on both accounts: “where would he be?” The reason he can recognize this as a possibility, whether he realizes it or not, is that it is, in many ways, a repetition of how he and Carrie came to be together: Drouet was rendered superfluous as Carrie “[e]ll into the hands of some cheap manager,” Hurstwood (emphasis added). If Hurstwood is not in on the joke, interestingly, this moment marks a loss of his most striking characteristic (that we witness earlier in the novel), his self-awareness, at the same time he confronts the possibility that Carrie may no longer be a kept woman as a “professional” woman would, by definition, not be a kept woman. Whether or not Hurstwood is in on the joke, here, Carrie is not converted from one kept woman to another, trafficked from one man to another, but from kept woman to actress: a kind of meta type that is both material and representational.

Though Carrie's entry into the world of acting brings about a change in her material conditions (earning a wage) and grants her a greater degree of freedom of movement, her consciousness of herself as a type is not immediate and her living situation with Hurstwood, for a time, remains unchanged. Both of these change, however, when Carrie receives a part in a "comic opera" with "no word assigned to" her (430). In the play, Carrie "was one of a group of oriental beauties who, in the second act . . . were paraded by the Vizier before the new potentate as the treasures of the harem" (430). At which time, Carrie's career is born:

the leading comedian and star, feeling exceedingly facetious, said in a profound voice, . . . 'Well, who are you?' It merely happened to be Carrie who was courtying [*sic*] before him. . . . He expected no answer and a dull one would have been reprov'd. But Carrie, whose experience and belief in herself gave her daring, courtesied [*sic*] sweetly again and answered: — 'I am yours truly'" It was a trivial thing to say, and yet something in the way she did it caught the audience, which laughed heartily . . . The comedian also liked it, hearing the laughter. Carrie almost trembled for her daring after she had said this. . . . As she was standing in her proper position in the wings, awaiting another entry, the great comedian made his exit past her and paused in recognition. "You can just leave that in hereafter," he remarked There was no gainsaying the value of this. Everybody in the company realised [*sic*] that she had got a start. Carrie hugged herself when next evening the lines got the same applause. (430-31)

While there are a number of interesting dynamics to unpack here, most basically, Carrie's career begins with a genre that is literally sung that nevertheless gives her no voice and reduces her to the body (she has "no word assigned to" her); her only communication, with a nod to melodrama, is supposed to be through gesture, and her only tool, her body. Moreover, she is specifically playing a concubine, a woman whose 'value' is directly linked to her sexual subjection ("the treasures of the harem"). But, Carrie is not a just a single concubine, she "was one of a group" who is singled out with a question of identity: "who are you?" To be clear, the comedian's question is a rhetorical one; and, to answer it would be to operate outside her assigned role ("All members of the company had been warned that to interpolate lines or

‘business’ meant a fine or worse”) (431). “But Carrie, whose *experience* and belief in herself gave her daring,” turns a question of identity into an answer about ownership: “I am yours truly” (emphasis added). In an image that poignantly condenses the novel’s account of the rise of self-reflexivity (one that arises from material subjection, but becomes understood through subjectification in an aesthetic production that involves a community of others), Dreiser has “Carrie hug[] herself when next evening the lines got the same applause.”³⁶ Carrie’s subjection in a world that treats her as an “object” gets recontextualized here on the stage. Carrie’s improvisation here (in both breaking with her assigned role and re-writing the text that she has been written into and written out of) marks the moment that the silent body is given a voice to speak what it is: “to pause[] in recognition” before becoming something else (a conversion to a higher plane in this instance). After learning that she “can just leave that in hereafter,” Carrie’s lines get written into the play and her part gets re-written as a speaking role. Carrie’s “experience” of subjection (treated as an object to be “own[ed],” a “treasure[] of [a] harem,” a member of a group), here “returns to itself” as Carrie both fulfills and transcends her type. There is thus an essential and necessary relation between Carrie’s subjection and her subjectification, her oppression and the possibility of her freedom from it, being treated as an object and the possibility of becoming a subject.³⁷ And, most importantly, Carrie’s new awareness here finally translates into an end of her subjection with Hurstwood.

By the end of the novel, Carrie has not only fulfilled and transcended her type, she

³⁶ This image mirrors the image of the culmination of Hurstwood’s loss of reflexivity: suicide.

³⁷ The start of Carrie’s career, the narrator suggests, is the product of chance (“It merely happened to be Carrie who was courtying [*sic*]”). Improv would seem to be a fitting image for this. But, if this moment is the product of chance, the turning of type against itself in this scene nevertheless speaks to a deterministic framework. And, more basically, chance and probability can certainly figure into various deterministic models of the world.

has learned to type others, which among other things, demystifies those that would take advantage of her. After performing in a Broadway play, Carrie encounters Drouet in her dressing room: “the drummer,” Charles Drouet. Though Carrie lets him in, she “fell back a pace, expecting an embarrassing conversation” (472). Like many a guest to the backstage of the theatre, Drouet is congratulatory of Carrie’s performance, “Say, you’ve got a great show. You do your part fine. . . . I always said you could act, didn’t I? I knew you would. . . . you do look great. . . . I never saw anybody improve so. You’re taller, aren’t you (472-73)? Drouet, by contrast, “though older, . . . was but slightly changed. The same fine clothes; the same stocky body; the same rosy countenance” (472). Carrie quickly realizes that for Drouet this is less a casual visit than an expression of his desire “to restore their old relationship, at once, and without modification” (473). To restore their relationship would, of course, be to return to their past based on necessity (Carrie attempting to avoid starvation in Chicago) and domination (a relationship implicitly based on the exchange of sex for food, shelter, and money). Not only does Drouet wish “to restore their old relationship,” by the next day, “he began to imagine it would not be so difficult to enter her life again” (475). The possibility of a future, which is at the same time a hope to return to a past “without modification,” for Drouet, is rooted in imagination and therefore the aesthetic. However, as the narrator lets us know, Carrie had already ‘decided’ this would not be a possibility back in the dressing room: “It was her feeling, however, that it could not be. She understood him better now – understood the type. He was not anyone whom she could admire or even associate with pleasantly. The world had taught her so much. She wondered that he did not appreciate the change” (473). Obviously, Carrie, no doubt, resents the implication that she would return to a life of sexual subjection and is understandably shocked to see him: “Carrie fell back a pace. . . . She was rather dazed by the assault” (472-73). But, another

part of what seems disagreeable to Carrie about Drouet (whose first name means “manly”) is his vulgarity and lack of aesthetic sense that prevents him from “appreciat[ing] the change.” To the extent that the novel is a *bildungsroman*, this would seem to be its culmination: “The world had taught her so much. She wondered that he did not appreciate the change.” Specifically, Carrie has spurned her old lover, entered the world of commerce and art, become independent, received an education in the world, and “improved,” or to use the biological metaphor so central to the novel, evolved. Carrie has gained that ineffable something that is everything to the protagonist of a *bildungsroman*: experience. But, as we know, that experience was not that of free movement, but of constraint and subjection.

Education, the other watchword of the *bildungsroman*, is, in the novel, utterly defamiliarized as well. The narrator, always making generalizations, tells us that women’s education is directly related to contrast: “how rapidly women learn. . . . within the possibilities of their environment they will pick and choose. Show them two men and they will understand which one appreciates women most. Such fine methods of comparison man does not possess. It is an inherited qualification of the sex, developed by ages of necessity” (93). While, on the one hand, this remark is the definition of essentialism, on the other, it is denaturalizing in that it reveals that the trait has not always existed (it is an adaptation “developed” over time) and that it is determined not because of something a woman is intrinsically, but because of the conditions of the historical contexts in which women have had to survive: those of “necessity.”

With experience and education (both rooted in the subjected body), Carrie has learned to read people, imputing internal states to exterior signs: “The same fine clothes; the same stocky body; the same rosy countenance.” To be the same body, more or less, is to be the same person, is to not “improve.” Drouet is, in the language of Dreiser’s love of equations, a constant. Carrie,

one who has “improve[d],” is variable. Carrie’s “improve[ment]” is here made literal: “You’re taller.” Though the literalness of Carrie’s growth may strike us as a little clunky (as does the idea of improvement being simply getting taller), the novel also offers a more conventional explanation of that “improvement” as this moment is an inversion of the novel’s opening scene in which Carrie “was not wise enough to be sure of the working of the mind of the other. . . . Already they felt that they were somehow associated. Already [Droeut] took control in directing the conversation” (9).

If this version of “improvement” sounds more convincing, perhaps it is because this explanation more nicely fits the literary convention of the reversal: Carrie now seems to understand “the working of the mind of the other,” has “control in directing the conversation,” and realizes that Drouet “was not anyone whom she could admire or even associate with pleasantly.” In this explanation, Carrie’s “improvement,” figured in the language of convention, makes one of the moments we most witness Carrie’s “improvement,” which we would think of as a particular protagonist’s development at a particular moment, one that is simultaneously one of the most general as the scene uses the melodramatic trope of confronting an old lover. The language of convention is the language of the formula, gesturing to the sense that this moment is somehow predetermined in form; this formula, too, maps on too Spencer’s idea of “harmony,” the balancing of conflicting forces on a long enough timeline.

Yet, it is precisely because it is general and formulaic that “improvement” (which means something like the transcendence and fulfillment of type) is possible. During a dinner discussion, August Ames, “looking directly at her now – studying her face . . . large, sympathetic eyes and pathetic mouth,” tells Carrie (who is endlessly being converted from one type to another) that she has “the sort of disposition that would do well in a strong comedy-drama” (480). Carrie is thus

typecast once more. Though Carrie has been a chorus girl in various popular operas, played parts in melodramas and farces (both physical genres reliant on type), up to this point, Carrie has not played a part in a “comedy-drama.” To play a part in the latter, Carrie’s acting would have to incorporate not only bodily signs (gesture), but verbal ones (language). And, in the course of a single performance, she would need to encompass the highs and the lows of experience with a great degree of subtlety and ambiguity. She might also have to improvise or otherwise bring a bit of personality to a role.

In short, such a realistic performance would have to be what we traditionally think of as naturalistic; it would also, finally, show “the double influence of characters over facts, of facts over characters” that Zola had predicted, not out of the changing tastes of the audience, but the material fulfillment and transcendence of melodramatic type. As the ingénue grows up, the “child of nature” is replaced by a woman of the theatre. This mirrors the way in which “naturalism’s [colloquially defined] authenticity of context and ambiguity of motivation brought ‘maturity’ to the drama of the later nineteenth century [and] . . . a retreat from the *explicit nature* of melodramatic acting” (Taylor 113; emphasis added). As Carrie has learned to type, then, character has been demystified for her (as she has learned to read type) while the birth of naturalistic acting and “Naturalism on the Stage” has been demystified for us as we have walked through one account of how type evolved to produce it.

Though, as quickly as we witness this demystification, a new form of mystification takes its place. Though naturalistic acting, and realist genres in general, are often associated with a depth of character (as opposed to type) and the mind, Ames initially bases his claim of Carrie’s fitness for “comedy-drama” on her appearance: “There’s a shadow about your eyes . . . which is pathetic. . . . Your natural appearance would suggest more to the audience than the careful make-

up of most people. . . . you would be a success, because I know the quality of that thing which your face represents” (485). But, as Ames “stud[ies]” Carrie’s face, like Carrie’s other lovers, he begins to assign meaning to that materiality. A face, here, is not just a particular appearance, but a representation of a “quality” or property, which is separable from any particular face. The “quality” that Ames reads on Carrie’s face is not that she is of a particular type (the ingénue, the kept woman, or the fallen woman) or any indication that he might be able to instrumentalize that information for his own purposes. Rather, Ames sees in Carrie “the many . . .the world . . . struggling to express itself . . . its hopes and sorrows. . . . [The world] is always seeking the means, and it will delight in the individual who can express these things for it. That is why we have great musicians, great painters, great writers and actors. They have the ability to express the world’s sorrows and longings” (485). As James Livingston writes, characters in romance (of which he counts *Sister Carrie*), are not contained by their world; instead somehow they contain it” (139). In containing all types, Carrie is both the universal and the particular. Carrie thus becomes one final version of type, the ideal (“the perfect Carrie in mind and body”) (485), fulfilling Spencer’s “goal of education . . . ‘to be the perfection, in each individual, of the attributes of human nature in general’” (qtd. in Lizardo 545).

For Ames, this is the task of the “great . . . actor” : to express the whole of what Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and others, would call the “social organism” in a particular piece of art, and therefore, to “serve the many” (486). Ames equivocates about how much this sort of expression is chosen and how much it is simply the product of all art understood as organic: “You and I are but mediums, through which something is expressing itself. Now, our duty is to

make ourselves ready mediums. . . .You must help the world express itself”³⁸ (485). Chosen or not, the artist as medium is a determined relation both because it speaks to an organicist understanding of art (making any piece of art inseparable from its world), in general, and because it emerges out of a particular material relation: the ecstatic union of artist and world (“the world . . . delight[ing] in the individual”) is a rewriting of the “delight” of Carrie’s lovers at the expense of her subjection.³⁹ The stage thus becomes the site of an unholy (and not unproblematic) communion.⁴⁰ The organicism at the heart of naturalism (an effort to demystify the world), here, becomes utterly mystifying. Dewey makes this abundantly clear: “the organism manifests itself as what it truly is, an ideal or spiritual life, a unity of will” (192). Dewey’s comment about the “social organism” is suggestive of the original title of *Sister Carrie: The Flesh and The Spirit*.

To demystify naturalism, then, is ultimately to see the organism “as what it truly is,” “a unity of will” that arises out of conflict; it is to see language emerge from matter; it is to see the human arise from the nonhuman; it is to see continuity in discontinuity and discontinuity in continuity, order in disorder and disorder in order; to see ‘will’ arise out of necessity; it is to witness the “science of faces” becoming art; it is to see a number of one note performances (melodramatic type) create a new “harmony”; it is to see the possibility of shared feeling (the goal of melodrama) in a world of private ownership; it is to see a totality as not simply a sum of

³⁸ Ames, here, is fairly directly standing in for Dreiser, who, in “explaining how he came to write the novel,” wrote, “My mind was a blank except for the name, . . . I had no idea who or what she was to be. I have often thought that there was something mystic about it, as if I were being used, like a medium” (qtd. in Rahv 73).

³⁹ For more on rewriting, see Jameson.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, in one of his more problematic moments, suggested that prostitution (in that it was the paradigmatic image of reification under capitalism for him) similarly entailed the “possibility of mythical communion with the mass” (qtd. in Salzani 144).

its parts – to see a property not found perfectly in any part, but expressed in each; it is, to see one final conversion: *Spirit* emerging from *Flesh*.

Cause and Affect, or, Richard Wright's "Personalist Naturalism"

Blame conditions, not men.
Frank Norris, *The Octopus*

I'm just black and they make the laws.
Bigger Thomas, *Native Son*

You know what holds those buildings up, Bigger?
Boris Max, *Native Son*

The basic unit of personalist creation will be the image, that is, an emotional perception of reality. The unity, emotional and philosophic, of these images will constitute the ruling symbol of the work. This symbol, constituted of images born of emotional perception will carry, organically embedded within it, the message or judgement of the writer.

Richard Wright, "Personalism"

RECAP

We ended the last chapter with a discussion of the possibilities of artistic creation in *Sister Carrie*. This moment marked the culmination of Carrie's development and the maturation of the stage at the end of the nineteenth century. We noted that this moment is bound up in the novel's organicism which makes the determined and utopian dimensions of this moment two sides of the same coin: we saw this (1) when type "returns to itself"⁴¹ allowing for transcendence of that type; and (2) in the novel's insistence on a necessary relation between subjugation and subjectification. We likewise focused on genre and gender as the two terms that mediated these dynamics. One of the implications of our discussion was that the development of character and that of form were linked. Even as it hailed the ascendancy of its heroine, *Sister Carrie* aligned women with the aesthetic. Carrie's subjugation, in the novel's thinking, could be said to be justified because of her transcendence of her type and the maturation of form ("You and I are but mediums, through which something is expressing itself. Now, our duty is to make ourselves ready mediums. . . . You must help the world express itself") (485). We might well find the novel wanting in this regard. But, we might also note that this is less a problem with the novel in

particular than a dynamic of organicist thought of which the novel takes part. For, one of the defining features of organicist thought is that its understanding of concepts and systems as relations (often expressed as contraries that are unified under some larger rubric) tends to see those relations as (well-nigh logically) necessary. In *Sister Carrie*, the novel's organicism ends up foregrounding one of the problematic legacies of naturalism, its treatment of women. As a result, the organicist thought on which the genre rests makes the genre feel, at the very least, strained when treating issues of gender (leaning so heavily as it does on biological explanations for social problems), justifying as it sometimes does all manner of subjugation, so often under the banner of necessity: "We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail" (Dreiser 73).

ORGANICISM AND REFLEXIVITY

Some forty years later with *Native Son* Richard Wright would make use of naturalism, but similarly struggle with the organicism at its center, specifically, in its relation to race. To appreciate the dynamics at play in Wright's struggle with organicism in particular and naturalism more broadly, consider a scene early in the novel when Bigger and his friend, Jack, walk by a movie theatre. The latter notes: "*Trader Horn*'s running again at the Regal. They're bringing a lot of old pictures back" (29). Turner Classic Movies describes the plot of *Trader Horn* in this way: "An African trader [who is white] and a white jungle goddess join forces against a hostile tribe."⁴² In this brief description, we can see the film's colonialism in miniature: white male commerce, white femininity (a "goddess"), and modernity are set up as opposed to black pre-modern life in the film. As we will see, this further breaks down into Western culture associated with the mind on the one hand and black embodiment on the other. As Bigger and Jack sit in the

⁴² For more on the 1931 MGM film *Trader Horn*, see <https://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/13517/trader-horn#overview>.

theater, a newsreel starts to play of “images of smiling, dark-haired white girls lolling on the gleaming sands of a beach” when the commentator begins speaking: “*Here are the daughters of the rich taking sunbaths in the sands of Florida! This little collection of debutantes represents over four billion dollars of America’s wealth and over fifty of America’s leading families*” (31). From all of these young women, the commentator focusses on Mary Dalton, “the daughter of the guy [Bigger is] going to work for”: a Chicago real estate magnate (32). As in *Sister Carrie*, white women are again presented as figures of value,⁴³ but in *Native Son*’s structure, the image of white women (here, Mary Dalton), for Bigger, precedes her physical presence occasioned by Bigger’s job that he acquires through a relief agency. This image of white femininity then directly precedes the film. As the film begins, Bigger:

looked at *Trader Horn* unfold and saw pictures of naked black men and women whirling in wild dances and heard drums beating and then gradually the African scene changed and was replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing He frowned in the darkened movie, hearing the roll of tom-toms and the screams of black men and women free and wild, men and women who were adjusted to their soil and home in their world, secure from fear and hysteria. (33-34)

As the first film to be shot on location in Africa that was not a documentary, *Trader Horn* makes claims to represent Africans with authenticity while the images and sounds onscreen are not only stereotypes of African culture, but are stereotypes of particular type, that of the *National Geographic* style, the main feature of which is feigning to represent a set of humans untouched by culture (i.e. as animals) in a cultural document. In other words, by reducing Africans to bodies outside of culture, the film figures the African body as animal, offering a racist version of what would later come to represent *National Geographic* style narration (as in, “observe the Hartebeest in its native habitat”). Such images are what we colloquially refer to as naturalistic

⁴³For more on the representation of women as figures of value, see Szalay’s “Pimps and Pied Pipers.”

despite their intensely composed quality and the fact that they are inflected with, for lack of a better word, the “colonial gaze.” As Wright has “the African scene” fade as it is “replaced by images . . . of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing,” we see the white wealth that has produced a white authored vision of blackness.

Discussing this scene, Michael Szalay writes, “the cinematic vision before Thomas’s eyes . . . is above all nonreflexive. This is the case because *Trader Horn* is devoid of people like Thomas: while the newsreels introducing the film recount the ‘real-life’ stories of wealthy scions of privilege like Mary Dalton, the film itself is populated by leering African ‘savages’” (252). I could not agree more with this reading. The scene short-circuits any attempts for the critic to find a corollary at the level of the novel or for Bigger to see himself represented onscreen (otherwise he would not “frown[] in the darkened movie” as he desires to feel “adjusted to the[] soil and home in the[] world”).

I would only make a few small additions to Szalay’s reading. First, this scene is further nonreflexive because of who is producing this image: the film is produced by white wealth and the novel is written by a black man. Second, while the scene is nonreflexive, it nevertheless introduces the interrelated problems of blackness, authorship, white wealth, white femininity, and naturalism. Third, the same moment the novel introduces these problems, it introduces the problem of form. Specifically, seeing what the novel does not take itself to be begs the question of what it might take itself to be (i.e. “what form would be adequate to the novel and where do we find a stand-in of that form in the novel itself?”). That is, this scene, (as the novel shows what the novel does not take itself to be), counterintuitively, is indicative of the novel’s attempt to give an account of its creation and of itself as a piece of art. And, fourth, this attempt is concomitant

with a more general desire to find a form adequate to the novel and one that navigates the interrelated problems of blackness, authorship, white wealth, white femininity, and naturalism.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS

Before turning to the form that best characterizes the novel's account of its creation and of itself in general, it is worth pausing to unpack a few of the reasons the interrelated problems of blackness, authorship, white wealth, white femininity, and naturalism are so freighted. The most basic of these interrelated problems is the relationship between white ownership and blackness arising out of the history of slavery, a system in which white ownership and wealth creation were bound up in extracting as much labor as possible from black bodies. In part, out of this material relation, whiteness becomes associated with ownership and the mind while blackness becomes associated with dispossession and the body. This sense of dispossession knew no bounds as it was common practice for white male plantation owners to rape black women. Yet, during Reconstruction, in a classic case of projection, the myth of the black male rapist, known as "the brute," was born.⁴⁴ This myth was memorialized most forcefully in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, a film that set white female "purity" against "the brute" who was depicted as criminal, animalistic, and hypersexual. In addition to providing a racist justification for Black Codes during Reconstruction and into the first part of the twentieth century, spreading this myth in films like *Birth of a Nation* allowed for the further accumulation of white wealth (for production and distribution companies) and reinforced the association of blackness with embodiment.

This sort of thinking is not just a legacy of slavery and cultural production, but of naturalism more broadly, which Jennifer Fleissner smartly defines as the "introduction into

⁴⁴ To be clear, this arises out of the changing material landscape of the Reconstruction era. See "The Brute Caricature" at the Jim Crow Museum, Ferris State University.

history of natural forces” (2). Given the toxic history of race throughout the world, it should be unsurprising to us that the rise of naturalism was concomitant with new versions of institutionalized racism as a number of pseudosciences (like eugenics and phrenology) sought to prove that differences in skin pigmentation translated into differences in behavior and differences in life outcomes (in that order). A consequence of this thinking is that social hierarchy starts to look like biological hierarchy with the position of ‘races’ seemingly justified by biology. A corollary to this thinking that cannot be acknowledged is that if one race has power and another does not, one must be the predator of the other. More basically, though, as society is taken to be biology the latter is taken to be a, if not the, driving force moving the former. This quickly leads to the idea of the “survival of the fittest,” a phrase coined by Herbert Spencer (Offer⁴⁵ 159).

Depending on which naturalist thinker one reads (with any given thinker changing their opinions over time), society itself was either taken to be the sum of its members⁴⁶ (“the character of the aggregate is determined by the characters of the units”) (Spencer 48), or, as an organism unto itself in which the parts and the whole were understood to exist in dialectical relation as in the work of John Dewey. Taking their cue from biological evolution, thinkers would at least nominally desire the improvement of the whole, that is, the evolution of society itself. On one side, by the time of *Native Son*’s publication, naturalists like Dewey sought to improve the whole through social programs.

And, on another, early naturalists like Spencer, an outspoken opponent of “social engineering,” sought to “improve” the whole through the study of and advocacy for eugenics.

⁴⁵ See John Offer’s “From ‘natural selection’ to ‘survival of the fittest’: On the significance of Spencer’s refashioning of Darwin in the 1860s.

⁴⁶ For more on the fallacy of composition in neo-naturalist thought, see McClanahan 21-55, especially 29-33.

The two most important features of eugenics, for our purposes, are (1) its embrace of racial “purity” and (2) the drive to optimize the whole social organism by irradiating “impurity” (a stand in for race, ethnicity, disability, etc.). Spencer’s logic could be summarized as such: the health of society is determined by its members; the members are determined by their biology; the biology of these members can be categorized by factors such as race, ethnicity, disability, etc., which can each be further categorized as ‘strengths’ or ‘weaknesses’; these factors, if passed on through reproduction will be passed on to subsequent generations; therefore, if we want to improve the health of the society, we must encourage the ‘strong’ to reproduce and discourage the ‘weak’ from doing so. Type, here, becomes weaponized. Yet, it is somewhat curious that Spencer, an avowed determinist, would, at the same time, advocate for any sort of change, much less one that would so blatantly intervene in ‘nature.’ (Nature, after all, is, by these thinkers, understood to be smarter than we are).

Spencer was not alone in his embrace of eugenics. Like his other theories, Spencer’s embrace of eugenics caught on quickly. By at least the early 1900s, eugenics was a legitimated field of study. And, months before the publication of Wright’s novel, Germany, little known to much of the world at the time, was beginning the largest genocide in history using eugenics as its governing logic. At this point, eugenics is not just about birth rates (and the possibility of forced sterilization), but about eliminating a population entirely, which, of course, was always the flip side of the ‘study.’ Eugenics was, then, very much a live issue by the time of the novel’s publication.

Despite its intersection with eugenics, naturalist thought’s vexed relationship to determinism is certainly one of Wright’s inheritances. We see this play out in a number of ways

in Wright's work (which we will address more thoroughly throughout). In *New Deal Modernism*, Szalay points us to one such passage in Wright's "How 'Bigger' Was Born":

Why should I not try to work out on paper the problem of what will happen to Thomas? Why should I not, like a scientist in a laboratory, use my imagination and invent test-tube situations, place Thomas in them, and, following the guidance of my own hopes and fears, what I had learned and remembered, work out in fictional form an emotional statement and resolution of this problem? ("How 'Bigger' Was Born" 523)

In this passage, Wright places himself directly in the lineage of naturalist writers as his comparison of himself as a writer to a "scientist in a laboratory" is a direct allusion to Émile Zola's "The Experimental Novel" – the germinal statement on naturalism in fiction. By now, we have seen a number of ways in which blackness and naturalism appear to be at odds. And, here, we see additional problems created when authorship enters the discussion. For example: the history of reducing blacks to the body in naturalism would seem to make no place for black works of art, which are, at least in part, characterized by the mind; the history of claiming black inferiority on the basis of race in naturalism would seem to make the naturalistic form a peculiar choice for a black writer. Szalay's reading of this scene lets us in on a further reason why this moment should strike us as odd: "Wright claims that the situations Thomas confronts are the product of his imagination, but that Thomas's responses to them are not, but are instead the projection in fictional form of 'what I had learned and remembered' (227). That is to say, the problem of determinism for Wright is found, in part, in the tension between the anxiety of authorship and his understanding of the world from a naturalist point of view. Determinism, here, would seem to exist and not exist, or, as we will see, appear both necessary and contingent. We will return to how Wright's determinism might rest on a form of contingency shortly.

For now, it is important to note that the problem of determinism is felt perhaps most forcefully when the author of naturalist text (the genre most interested in 'creation') attempts to

account for their own work. All such writing, after all, is a form of self-mythologization. Yet, that self-mythologization (in texts like “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born”) will seem at odds with the perspective of naturalistic determinism. This problem becomes even more acute when we find Wright espousing one form of determinism or another at the same time he expresses hope for writing to have a social function; he does this repeatedly in his writings, from *Native Son* to “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” from “The Blueprint for Negro Writing” to “Personalism” and his introduction to *Black Metropolis*. Wright’s desire for writing to have a social function spans multiple stages of his career and a number of the political philosophies that interested him, whether they be black nationalism, Marxism, or “personalism.”

Now that we have explored the interrelated problems of blackness, authorship, white wealth, white femininity, and naturalism, we are now faced with a number of questions: “Whence artistic legitimacy in determinism?”; “What is a determinism that involves contingency?”; “What is the relation between Wright’s art and his materialism?”; “Why choose a genre that is characterized by an underlying belief in black inferiority and reduces blacks to the body?”; “Why would *Native Son* be written in a genre associated with biological essentialism?”; “Why would Wright take up a form that implies that he is an ‘impurity’ to be irradiated?”; “How, in all this, does Wright’s materialism allow him to make claims about the importance of the word and our beliefs in shaping the world?”; and, “How do white wealth and white femininity enter into these discussions?”

At the same time, these questions do not solely arise at the level of form. Rather, these questions arise out of the conflicts of the material contexts in which Wright lived – as a writer and as an African-American who had previously lived in the “Black Belt” during part of the Depression. Living in Chicago and working closely with the Urban Sociologists at the University

of Chicago had taught Wright about the processes that had shaped Chicago into its intensely segregated form. That is to say, Wright and the Urban Sociologists understood Chicago to be both a product (the segregated city) and a set of processes (the regime of accumulation that created it, including formal and informal housing policies like “restrictive covenants”), figure (a “living entity”) and ground (“Environment”), in the words of Carlo Rotello, a “city of feeling” and a “city of fact”⁴⁷ (Rotello 3). As we will see, the novel’s formal problems are both created and resolved by the material force of writing in the segregated city, that is to say, by restrictive covenants. With this in mind, we return to the problem of form and the novel’s reflexivity.

FORM AND ARGUMENT MAP

To resolve these problems at the level of form, Wright makes two key modifications to classic naturalism: (1) following the lead of the urban sociologists at the University of Chicago, Wright used the framework and language of ecology as a way to understand social processes that gave rise to the segregated city (especially, restrictive covenants), thereby displacing natural processes with social ones; and, (2) Wright complemented the novel’s naturalism with what he termed a “personalist aesthetic.”

Taken together, the resulting novel can best be understood as a work of, what I term, “personalist naturalism.” At times, naturalism, even Wright’s repurposed naturalism, will feel incompatible with the novel’s “personalism” (as in the former’s focus on determining systems and the latter’s focus on the individual). At others, naturalism and “personalism” will appear to be complementary as the pairing allows Wright to convey not only the objective material structures that determine the lives of its inhabitants, but how it might feel to live in a world in

⁴⁷ I am repurposing Rotello’s language here. For Rotello, “cities of fact” denote real historical material histories while “cities of feeling” denote the representational strategies authors use to depict cities. While I am using “cities of fact” in much the same way, I am using “cities of feeling” to describe how it feels to live in such cities, as represented in literature.

which one's life is determined. At still others, the novel's attempt to bring together these two aesthetics involves alternatively re-writing the terms of each and carving out a space between them. In each case, "personalist naturalism" is a form that embodies the ambivalence of a novel that always seems to want to have it both ways: to be a concrete picture of the way things are and to express how it feels live in that world; to focus on causes ("laws") and affects⁴⁸; to describe a world as a system and to find fault with a particular actor in it; to see the social organism and the person; to depict the world as the product of necessity and contingency; to posit a materialism and insist on the power of writing.

ARGUMENT MAP

To examine how the novel resolves its formal and material problems, this chapter begins by exploring the aesthetic features that the novel shares with classic naturalism. We then move to the novel's engagement with Urban Sociology, in particular, its interest in the structural dynamics that shaped segregated Chicago's housing. In this section, we examine how naturalism and Urban Sociology gives Wright a language and a framework to describe the brutal realities of housing in Chicago. In this section, the presence of naturalism is embodied in the figure of a curtain, a figure that represents naturalism as a set of determined limits. As we move through our analysis in this section, it will become clear that the novel's naturalism is not only re-purposed, but defamiliarized to the point of unrecognizability. Naturalism, then, is not only represented by limits, but, in Wright's hands, is of limited use. These limits, as we will see, arise when Wright bristles against the tendency towards abstraction in naturalism, but also in naturalism's limited capacity to give an account of how bad actors within a system can be held accountable. In this section, we will repeatedly turn to classic naturalist texts to see how Wright modifies those

⁴⁸ For more on affect in *Native Son*, see Szalay's *New Deal Modernism* 201-55.

elements and what those modifications mean for the politics of *Native Son*. Towards the end of this section, we will examine the novel's engagement with the discourse of eugenics.

After discussing the affordances and limits of naturalism, we will move to the next major section on the affordances of the "personalist aesthetic" in the novel. The novel's "personalist" elements are represented, once again, in the figure of the curtain. Here, we will explore what it means to cross the color-line in the novel, a process that is described in terms that are, alternatively, interpersonal and material. We will zero in on the role of feeling, experience, and that of the individual in the novel. In this section, we pay particular attention to the role of persons, representations, and the novel's imagined readership to understand how the novel comes to terms with the problem of blackness, white wealth, and white femininity. We likewise will discuss the problem of the individual and group here. This section finds Wright objecting to: (1) the ways that urban sociology turned race into an object of knowledge (in particular, its discourse of type); (2) a politics built on witnessing the suffering of others, that is, the politics of racial liberalism; and (3) the whims of a sentimental reading public, even as he is enamored by each. We will then briefly touch on the failures of "personalism" alone as a way of making sense of the novel as the novel's materialism returns in full force.

In the last major section of the paper, we examine "personalist naturalism" itself and the specific ways it resolves the problems we have discussed, including naturalism's association with eugenics and the problem of artistic legitimacy in a determined world. Wright resolves these problems by examining the role of writing alongside the role of restrictive covenants in the novel. Here, we find that the novel's formal problems are not only created by restrictive covenants, but resolved by them as well. That is to say, the novel resolves the problem of determinism and writing most convincingly not by evading history – an attempt to flee a

determining world – but by turning towards history and incorporating it in its very form. Yet, because the novel does not end with this largely convincing resolution, this chapter does not either. In closing, we turn to the novel’s last scene, which finds Wright retreating from that resolution as he attempts to replace the novel’s materialist determinism with a form of mediatic determinism, which may be no determinism at all.

NATURALISM AND *NATIVE SON*

Native Son has long been read as a naturalist novel and for good reason: the novel shares a number of features of classic naturalist texts. Like *McTeague* and *The Octopus*, *Native Son* places great emphasis on violence and the ‘emasculating’ effects of the world.⁴⁹ Like *Sister Carrie*, *Native Son* is almost encyclopedic in its attempt to give an account of everything in its world. The encyclopedic impulse of naturalism, in the novel, is directly related to its engagement with Urban Sociology. That framework shows up in the novel’s depiction of its world (made up of material processes that form a totalizing system) and its characters as, in part, “character type[s]”: the novel’s title, for example, both refers to Bigger while also referring to millions of other men (Cappetti 182); and, as Szalay notes, Bigger “is a composite character . . . derived from no fewer than five figures” that Wright had met (226). *Native Son* often seems like it goes out of its way to upend realist relations of character and world, resulting in the latter seeming much more powerful than the former. Environment, in the classic naturalist novel, as we have seen, determines all.

The novel dabbles in determinism in a number of ways. Like George Hurstwood before him, Bigger Thomas commits his first crime in the novel while drunk. Further, Bigger kills Mary

⁴⁹ For more on masculinity and naturalism, see the introduction to Fleissner’s *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*.

on accident. Szalay notes that the novel generally separates intention from consequences; he further notes that Max's speech explicitly argues that the agency of systems displaces that of the individual in the novel (225-26). And, like other naturalist novelists, Wright sometimes uses passive-voice constructions that focus more on the effects of a given action than the actor. For example, Bigger knows that he can only rent housing "where it had been decided that black people might live" (248-49). If there are actors in the world at all, Bigger knows that he is not one of them. Bigger, as a "character type," follows a path that confirms his powerlessness at the hands of his environment. In the novel, this sense of determinism is expressed most often through formal representations of enclosures and limits. Consequently, Bigger experiences the world as a set of enclosures and limits that determine his fate, whether those that keep him in place or push him hither and thither.

NATURALISM AS LIMITS IN *NATIVE SON*

As limits and enclosures become figures for the presence of determined nature of Bigger's world in the novel, enclosures and limits come to indicate the presence of determinism in the novel. Enclosures and limits are therefore absolutely constitutive of the novel's naturalism. *Native Son* places the reader within a world of limits and enclosures, and therefore the world of naturalism, from the first pages. The first scene opens on Bigger along with his mother, younger sister, and younger brother living in a tiny run-down kitchenette situated in the Black Belt of Chicago. The kitchen, dining room, bedroom, and living room are all confined to "one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep" (326).

As the kitchenette has no formal division between kitchen, dining room, bedroom, and living room, the family places a divider in the center of the room in the form of a curtain. The curtain serves as both a formal structure interior to the room (with the hardened walls serving as

form of internal exteriority) and an additional exterior, marking off a room within a room. The narrator tells us during this opening scene that Bigger “hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. . . . he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain”⁵⁰ (10). As the curtain divides the room in two, the small space of the kitchenette gets even smaller, creating the sense that the walls, as in many naturalist texts, appear to be closing in. We will return to the active spaces later. For now, it is important to note that the novel’s sense that being “powerless” (read: determined) and being enclosed in tight spaces are, from the first scene, linked. Yet, the curtain does more than gesture toward the novel’s determinism.

For, while the curtain divides the room in two, it also literally and figuratively divides the members of the Thomas family from one another. In the kitchenette, the principle of division is based on gender with the curtain functioning as an extension of the family’s practice of “avert[ing] their eyes,” which allows the family a modicum of privacy (Wright 3). Carren Irr notes, this practice is part of the family’s effort to “preserve their collective modesty while dressing” (200). Modesty, here, is made possible by the curtain functioning as an impediment to vision. As a form that divides, the curtain functions as a boundary or limit, a line separating an “us” from a “them,” a “me” from a “you.” Which is to say, through its formal and sensuous qualities, the curtain makes possible and forecloses certain types of sociability. Boundaries and limits, here, therefore make division and separation possible. As we will see, *Native Son* is

⁵⁰ This paper is not the first to provide a reading of the curtain in the novel. In *American Optic*, Mikko Tuhkanen, drawing, in part on this quote, foregrounds the curtain as a psychological structure. In Tuhkanen’s Lacanian framework, the curtain has a “double function . . . as an inadequate strategy of survival, and as a form of mimicry that enables (however limited and short-term) guerrilla tactics—exemplifies one of the forms of ostentatious obsequiousness that black Americans have had to adopt to survive” (54). For more on the potential liberatory function of the curtain in a Lacanian context, see Tuhkanen 37-54.

populated with many such boundaries and forms that divide, including lines, fences, walls, cells, and curtains.

Following Kimberly W. Benston, who argues that the kitchenette, “with its circular maze in which the rat is lethally entrapped, is a metonymy of Bigger’s Chicago, . . . delineated by its Loop and endless rows of enmeshing ‘cells,’” we might read the physical structure of the kitchenette and the family’s actions in that space as signifiers of the construction of social space⁵¹ (including the role of boundaries, limits, and dividers) and the social practices that its construction necessitates (84-85). In noting the similarities between the city and the kitchenette, Benston implies that Bigger’s “world” of “enclosures,” including the “cell-like” quality of the kitchenette, is matched in some way at the level of the city (85). An analysis of the likeness between the kitchenette and South Side Chicago confirms Benston’s claim: both South Side Chicago and the kitchenette are, in fact, dominated by enclosures (like “cells”) and boundaries. In the kitchenette, as we have seen, this sense of enclosures within enclosures is embodied by the presence of the curtain in the kitchenette.

As both a formal structure interior to the room (with the hardened walls serving as form of internal exteriority) and a new exterior, marking off a room within a room, the curtain is one

⁵¹ As a form that models social space (outside the domestic interior precisely by drawing attention to the domestic interior) and mediates between multiple referents, contexts, and lines of sight, the curtain, as a form, is fluid and multiple. To make sense of the curtain’s formal fluidity and its relation to social space, I follow infrastructuralists who attend to how “literary fictions . . . try to make infrastructure, as well as its absence, visible” (Rubenstein, Robbins, Beal 576). Kate Marshall, whose framework helps us make sense of forms of “exteriority within the interior,” is especially helpful here (3). The perceived givenness of a particular form turns out to be highly contingent, or worse, completely inaccurate. [“Interiority,” in this framework, “is embedded in concrete rather than psychic structures” (5).] For Marshall, the notion of the home (and other walled structures) as a bounded structure is exploded when we consider its connection to various infrastructural forms like electric grids, water pipes, and, in the case of *Native Son*, furnaces. The division between architecture and infrastructure here proves to be a precarious distinction. Likewise, according to Marshall’s model, “occupying public or private space,” mutually constitutive of one another, “becomes . . . two ways of saying the same thing” (27). While Marshall’s method (and that of other infrastructuralists) greatly informs my own reading of form in the novel, the curtain is less a form of architecture or infrastructure itself than a symptomatic representation of it. Nevertheless, the curtain functions in much the same way as architectural and infrastructural forms. But, precisely because the curtain is symptomatic, it challenges our assumptions about what architectural and infrastructural forms are and do.

of the primary ways the novel foregrounds the presence of structures within structures just as the Black Belt “is [a] city within a city” (Cayton and Drake 115). The curtain, then, as Kate Marshall notes of corridors, “houses exteriority within the interior” (3). Though Marshall is explicitly discussing physical structures, the curtain also reflects institutional structures that are not physically present in the room, but nonetheless determine the construction of that room. As a form that “houses exteriority within the interior,” the curtain and its cognates (walls, lines, fences, cells, maps, sheets of snow) function as a kind of map of South Side Chicago, not just of literal places, but of the institutions, structures, and practices that govern that space, and thereby, the lives of its inhabitants. The curtain thus functions as both an object arising out of a specific material context and a symptomatic representation of that context.

In its function as a boundary of division that determines the lives of its inhabitants, the curtain and its cognates (like “lines”) map onto the context of the segregation of Chicago. As we noted, the curtain makes possible and forecloses certain types of sociability it separates an “us” from a “them,” a “me” from a “you.” Bigger is intimately acquainted with the stark divisions between black and white spaces. Space, for Bigger, often appears fixed. To give just a few of the many examples, Bigger knows that he “could not live in a building across the ‘line,’” outside of “this prescribed area, this corner of the city” (174); “[h]e knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the ‘line.’” (248-49); and, as he tells Max, “[t]hey draw a line and say for you to stay on your side of the line. They don’t care if there’s no bread over on your side. They don’t care if you die. . . . you try to come from behind your line they kill you” (351).

To better understand Chicago and the structures that confined its inhabitants, Wright turned to Urban Sociology. In his introduction to St. Claire Drake and Horace Cayton’s

monumental *Black Metropolis*, Wright lets us know: “[i]t was from the scientific findings of men like the late Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth that I drew meanings . . . for my novel, *Native Son*”; these writings, he found, could help explain “the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted” him and other African-Americans (Drake and Cayton *xvii-xviii*).⁵² Wright argued that works of urban sociology “were written . . . so that Negroes will be able to interpret correctly the meaning of their own actions” (Drake and Cayton *xx*).

Ultimately, Wright suggested, such writings, created a “concrete vision of the forces that molded the urban Negro’s body and soul” (Drake and Cayton *xvii-xviii*). Wright’s use of the word, “force,” here, should remind us of naturalism’s rhetoric of force that we discussed in the last chapter. So, too, should words like “environment” and “scientific.” But, here, we can start to see how Wright’s naturalism differs from naturalist writers who posit a continuity between nature and culture or presuppose the primacy of nature as the determinant of the social. Wright’s use of naturalistic concepts, here, replace biological explanations with sociological ones, biological determinism with social determinism. While Fleissner suggests that classic naturalism is marked by a moment when Nature and History started to be understood as mutually constitutive, here, the Natural most basically furnishes the language and the framework for understanding History. In other words, for Wright, it is less that Nature and History exist on a continuum than that Natural concepts (like ecology) are ciphers for Historical ones (what we might, for lack of a better word, call the social).

⁵² In “Sociology of an Existence: Richard Wright and the Chicago School,” Carla Cappetti “investigates Wright’s sociological imagination” through his “personal relationship with the Chicago School of Urban Sociology” and his “appropriation of a theoretical framework from sociology” in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* (25). However, Wright’s interest in sociology was not just expressed in his autobiographies as Wright provided the introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton’s 1945 landmark work of urban sociology, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*.

The primary actor in such a framework is no longer nature, *in abstracto*, nor the biology of its actors, but social structures that make up the city. In his germinal essay of the discipline (which Wright refers to in the introduction of *Black Metropolis*), Robert E. Park suggests the city is first and foremost a “living entity” (4), one that should be studied according to what he termed “human ecology” (a study of the interaction of the individual and the environment) (2). Park’s colleague, Ernest W. Burgess, goes on to suggest that, like a body, the city is composed of various “processes” that determine the lives of its inhabitants (48, 53-54). In *Writing Chicago*, Carla Cappetti argues that urban sociology’s turn to the organic was a way to contradict received understandings of the city as “outside of history” (36). Rather than an evasion of history, then, the use of biological concepts allowed the urban sociologists and Wright to turn toward history.

In this framework, there need not be a contradiction between blackness and this form of naturalist thought; Wright’s engagement with the organicist language and framework of urban sociology allowed him to, as Carlo Rotella suggests of the postwar urban novel, “capture the city on paper in ways that revealed its structuring logic” (51). But, of course, segregation was not just a result (space as product); it was a set of historical processes. These processes, in most accounts of the rise of the segregated city, like *Black Metropolis*, begin with Northern Migration, which increases the density of northern cities like Chicago. Drake and Cayton notice that once blacks arrive in Chicago, they are not evenly dispersed throughout the city, but live in the Black Belt: “a city within a city” (115). As Richard Rothstein has shown, the segregation of America’s cities was not simply the result of *de facto* segregation (i.e. segregation based on individual preferences). Rather, the segregation of cities like Chicago was the result of racialized zoning, restrictive covenants (upheld by judicial decisions), and the structural incentives of real estate. That is, as Rothstein shows, the segregated city was in many ways a state sponsored form of

segregation that allowed for the creation of a particular spatial regime of accumulation that was, by definition, racialized.⁵³

This spatial regime of accumulation via real estate was made possible, most basically, by ownership of private property and the renting of said property to tenants who pay for the mortgage on that property plus a surplus (which increases the net worth and ongoing income of the rentier at the same time).⁵⁴ Such assets would be, properly speaking, fixed (in that capital is locked within those assets), but, by the nature of being assets that produce income, are also a source of liquidity. So it is in the novel. The Thomas family, we learn, rents the kitchenette from the South Side Real Estate Company, a company owned by one Mr. Dalton who will, in melodramatic fashion, be revealed to be Bigger's future employer (and the father of Mary Dalton, whom we have already referenced in the introduction). The limits and enclosures of the kitchenette reveal Bigger's world to not only be enclosed in spatial restraints (whether in the kitchenette or the Black Belt more broadly), but in the closed circuit of the family's material world: Bigger works for Mr. Dalton in order to receive payment to be able to support his family, in part, by paying rent to Mr. Dalton who will continue to accrue wealth and ongoing income, which enables him to buy more properties, hire more laborers, create more wealth, and so on and so on, *ad infinitum*, all the while the Thomases remain impoverished. As real estate investors and developers like Dalton buy additional properties, the seller (and former owner) transfers the deed of said property to the new owner and signs a contract with whatever stipulations upon which the seller and buyer have agreed. In the novel, as in history, such contracts were explicitly racialized.

⁵³ For more on this, see Rothstein.

⁵⁴ We will return to more ways in which owners increased profits in this manner throughout.

NATURALISM, LIMITS, AND RESTRICTIVE COVENANTS IN *NATIVE SON*

For our purposes, the most important provision written into such properties that contributed to the accumulation of white wealth and the segregation of such cities was restrictive covenants, specifically, racial restrictive covenants. According to Drake and Cayton, restrictive covenants are “an agreement between property owners within a certain district not to rent or sell to Negroes” (179). These covenants then divide black from white space. In *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth T. Jackson notes, “such covenants . . . were legal provisions written into property deeds” and “a common method of prohibiting black occupancy” in areas whites already lived (313). In Chicago, “restrictive covenants” were designed to “segregate . . . Negroes to the Black Belt” (113). The primary creators of these covenants, as Drake and Cayton note, were “property owners’ associations” (Drake and Cayton 116). Richard Rothstein writes, “racial covenants took the form of a contract among all owners in a neighborhood” (Rothstein 79). This contract had to be ratified by every neighborhood attempting to implement a restrictive covenant. In a speech cited by Drake and Cayton, a Chicago local described restrictive covenants as a “fine network of contracts” that, gesturing toward their use as a mechanism of containment, functioned “like a marvelous delicately woven chain of armor” around white neighborhoods (Drake and Cayton 79). As such contracts were implemented, neighborhoods became “all-white” or “all-Negro” going forward (Drake and Cayton 195). “By 1930,” Drake and Cayton write, “such measures had become so widespread, . . . that three-fourths of all the residential property in the city was bound by restrictive covenants. It could not be rented or sold to Negroes” (184). Consequently, over time, the creation of white wealth (made possible in part by increasing access to home ownership and the use of restrictive covenants) increased while black poverty remained and increased (in

part, because of lack of access to home ownership). The result was an incredibly rigid form of spatial segregation.

Restrictive covenants, in so rigidly separating black from white spaces, map onto the curtain's function as a boundary or limit, rendering such agreements part and parcel of the novel's naturalism. Or, we might say that the novel's naturalism, in mediating between public and private, material and discursive form, space and product and space as process, arises out the imaginary created by restrictive covenants. Before turning to the novel's characterization of the social space that restrictive covenants created (space as product), it is worth noting exactly how restrictive covenants function, whose interests are served by these covenants, what drives their creation, and how restrictive covenants are not only justified, but backed by institutional and material structures.

The legality of restrictive covenants was upheld in the 1926 Supreme Court Case on restrictive covenants, *Corrigan v. Buckley*. Herman Belz writes, *Corrigan v. Buckley* “involved a restrictive covenant formed by white property owners in the District of Columbia in 1921 to prevent the sale of property to black citizens. Subsequently a white owner [Corrigan] made a contract to sell her property to a black person, provoking a suit to enforce the covenant and stop the sale” (Belz). In response to Corrigan selling her property to a black person (thereby breaking the terms of the restrictive covenant), Buckley and others involved in the covenant seized the property. Both the lower courts and the Supreme Court found this seizure of property constitutional despite Corrigan's claim that the action was a violation of the Fifth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth Amendments. In the decision, Belz notes, “Justice Edward T. Sanford disposed of the constitutional argument raised against the covenant by noting that the Fifth Amendment limited the federal government, not individuals; the Thirteenth Amendment, in matters other than

personal liberty, did not protect the individual rights of blacks; and the Fourteenth Amendment referred to state action, not the conduct of private individuals” (Belz). Thus, the decision in *Corrigan v. Buckley* held that although it would be illegal for the government to segregate housing, that same standard did not apply to private contracts and sales.

Native Son problematizes *Corrigan v. Buckley* (and thereby the validity of restrictive covenants) by challenging the rigid division of public and private on which the ruling relies. During Bigger’s murder trial, the state attorney, David Buckley, serves as prosecutor. Given the novel’s interests in restrictive covenants, Buckley’s name should be immediately resonant as the name of the former property owner who created a restrictive covenant to prevent the future sale of a property to a black person. But, in the novel, as state prosecutor, Buckley is a representative of the state. During Bigger’s trial, Buckley claims to be “[s]peaking for the grief-stricken families of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears [Bigger’s murdered girlfriend], and for the People of the State of Illinois” (374). In so doing, Buckley aligns the Dalton family, “the People of the State of Illinois,” and the state’s mechanism of maintaining order, the law, with one another (374). As the prosecutor (if for no other reason than his desire to win the case), Buckley’s interests are aligned with those of the Daltons, implying that the interests of the state and those of white capital are linked, interestingly, through affect: “grief.”

Wright’s choice to name the state attorney “Buckley” suggests that not only are the interests of the Daltons (as individuals whose daughter was killed) and the state aligned in this moment, but makes clear that the interests of real estate magnates are, in fact, supported by the state. In the first scene that Buckley and Dalton appear together, the narrator notes, “[s]wiftly, Buckley crossed the room and shook hands with Mr. Dalton” (293, emphasis added). The image of shaking hands indicates a kind of “gentleman’s agreement,” here, between public and private

parties. Such an agreement gestures toward the odd way restrictive covenants were justified by the Supreme Court. The opinion of the court held that because restrictive covenants were primarily private arrangements, they could not be regulated. If the state took part in the same practices, they would be unconstitutional. The name “Buckley” and the image of the two men shaking hands suggests that in sanctioning racially discriminatory housing practices at the level of private individuals and corporations, ironically, the state participated in that same system of racial discrimination.⁵⁵ Restrictive covenants, in this view, are crafted to serve the interests of private parties (for the accumulation of wealth), but are, crucially, supported by the state.⁵⁶ As such, the novel shows that white wealth (made possible by the structural incentives of real estate and restrictive covenants) largely produces social space, that is, the segregated city, with the sanction of the state.

While the structural incentives of real estate and the creation of restrictive covenants drove the creation of the segregated city (represented in the novel by the curtain and its cognates) separating black from white spaces, they also simultaneously restructured black space. When the Thomases divide the kitchenette in two with the curtain, they create two smaller rooms. Though the kitchenette is already quite small, dividing the room into two “rooms” makes each “room” that much smaller, effectively compressing space. We might read such a compression as an

⁵⁵ A corollary to this claim would be that the action of the state was unconstitutional. For an extended account of this claim, see Richard Rothstein’s *The Color of Law*.

⁵⁶ We might well wonder why such policies would be supported by the state. The answer, it seems, is actually almost identical to that provided by real estate companies: to maintain high property values. In *Crabgrass Frontier*, Jackson notes that the Federal Housing Administration’s *Underwriting Manual* “was extraordinarily concerned with ‘inharmonious racial or nationality groups.’ It feared that an entire area could lose its investment value if rigid white-black separation was not maintained. Bluntly warning, ‘If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes,’ the *Underwriting Manual* openly recommended ‘subdivision regulations and suitable restrictive covenants’ that would be ‘superior to any mortgage’” (312-13).

analogue for the ways in which the constraining world of naturalist novels become even more so when race is explicitly introduced. Yet, again, the reconstruction of space at the micro level cannot be understood without understanding the bleak material conditions that necessitated it.

In limiting where blacks could live, restrictive covenants, and the processes that followed, resulted in “the Problem of Congestion” (Drake and Cayton 113). Division and separation here becomes concentration. “Restrictive covenants,” Drake and Cayton show, not only “confine Negroes to the Black Belt, . . . they” also “subordinate” them by “limit[ing] the Black Belt to the most rundown areas of the city” (113). For Drake and Cayton, the design of restrictive covenants dehumanize families like the Thomases at least three times over as they limit blacks to one area of the city, guarantee that available housing options will be of poor quality, and ensure that said housing will not be improved. By delimiting the area available for blacks to procure housing, restrictive covenants created a shortage of housing available for black residents. Thus, “the insistent housing demands that arise from Black Metropolis are essentially demands for more room, for a larger Black Belt, one not confined to the deteriorated slum areas of the city” (Drake and Cayton 114). Concentration becomes confinement.

While the reconstruction of social space was most visible at the macro level (with rentiers like Dalton using restrictive covenants outside the Black Belt to ensure that blacks could not expand outside the Black Belt’s limits for the purposes of maximizing profit per dwelling), this reconstruction took place at the micro level as well. After limiting the area where blacks could live (segregation as division and separation), real estate investors and developers, in an effort to extract as much rent as possible from a given property, would further divide their properties and the dwellings within them into multiple smaller dwellings. Upon confining the black population to the Black Belt, rentiers like Dalton “converted” single family homes “into rooming houses and

larger apartments into multiple one-, two-, and three-room units” (Duneier 31).⁵⁷ The curtain’s reconstruction of space in the Thomas kitchenette, in this sense, is an almost literal recreation of what Beryl Satter calls Chicago’s “cut-up” apartments: already small apartments compressed even further. (Satter 51). For a family living in one of these dwellings, the walls of the space would appear to literally be closing on them. This material relation goes some way in explaining the novel’s claustrophobia and the sense that its spaces, as in other naturalist texts,⁵⁸ often appear to be alive.⁵⁹ As restrictive covenants limited areas of the city where blacks could live in the first place, they functioned as a precursor for further reconstructing black space through the division of a dwelling into multiple dwellings. Duneier notes, “these conversions accelerated property depreciation” and quickly led to the “decay of housing” (31).

The reconstruction of black space thus created the conditions for the deterioration of that space. In the Black Belt, Drake and Cayton, using a passive voice construction fitting of a

⁵⁷ Richard Rothstein notes one such example; in 1946, “[a] . . . national magazine article described a Chicago building where the landlord had divided a 540-square-foot storefront into six cubicles, each housing a family. He had similarly subdivided the second story” (173).

⁵⁸ The presence of active spaces in naturalism speaks to the determining role of environment in classic texts like *McTeague* and *Sister Carrie*. The general sense in classic naturalist texts is that this sense of activity is related to the productive nature of those spaces, whether that be the workings of the clock-like city of *McTeague*’s San Francisco that seems to wake and fall asleep with the beginning and the ending of the working day or the rise of Chicago in *Sister Carrie*. That is, such spaces are active, in part, because of their relation to industries that sustain life and are the grounds for the creation of new life. That these texts often end in death does not change the source of their activity; rather, it is indicative of the way in which production can sustain a life of a community at the same time that the lives of workers are rendered precarious. I do not mean to at all suggest that industry is, in some sense, virtuous (at least not under the current conditions or those of the novels). I simply mean that productivity and the sustaining of life in such texts are linked. In black naturalist texts like *Native Son* and *The Street*, spaces seem even more active than classic naturalist texts to the point that such spaces often seem to be haunted. In *Spectacle of Property*, John David Rhodes argues that property and blackness will always exist in an uncanny relation, given the history of blacks being deemed property during slavery. In addition, as David Harvey has shown in “The Urban Process Under Capitalism,” the productivity of real estate capital remains (except during periods when buildings are being built or renovated) fixed for most of the property’s ‘life.’ That makes real estate capital, especially as it relates to blackness, not related to sustaining life so much as it is an extraction of life. Real estate cannot help but be haunted by itself. For more on this, see Harvey and Rhodes.

⁵⁹ For an extended account of the various representational strategies novelists used to describe urban spaces during periods of constant flux, see Rotello.

naturalist novel, write “[h]ousing is allowed to deteriorate and social services are generally neglected” (113). With its minimal furnishings and run-down condition, the Thomas family’s kitchenette is representative of housing in the Black Belt more broadly as it shows visible signs of such deterioration: “[t]here was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and ceiling hung loose in many places. There were two worn iron beds, four chairs, an old dresser, and a drop-leaf table on which they ate” (105). From what we can tell, the kitchenette’s deterioration is more aesthetic than structural; this is not the case with other spaces in the Black Belt: “the city was condemning houses in which Negroes lived as being too old and too dangerous for habitation. . . . [Bigger] remembered the time when the police had come and driven him and his mother and his brother and sister out of a flat in a building which had collapsed two days after they had moved” (248). While the police stepped in before the building’s inhabitants would have died in the building two days later, the short time between when the inhabitants were “driven . . . out” and the building “collaps[ing]” points to the utter precarity of life in the Black Belt. To be clear, this moment is not at all an exaggeration. If anything, the fact that Bigger’s family survives this collapse underplays the precarity of life in the Black Belt. For, as Satter notes, “cut-up” apartments (like the Thomases’ kitchenette) were often fire traps, many of which burned down with residents still inside.

In a sense, this moment marks a kind of culmination of the novel’s naturalism and the height of its engagement with Urban Sociology as we see how powerfully life and death in the Black Belt are not determined by the individual preferences and choices of its inhabitants, but by forces outside of their control, specifically, the construction and destruction of social space, a consequence of the dictates of capital and restrictive covenants that aid in the accumulation of white wealth.

In foregrounding the consequences of restrictive covenants and segregation more broadly, Wright recasts naturalism's ongoing flirtation with eugenics in spatial terms; for, *Native Son* repurposes naturalism's emphasis on racial "purity" by showing that the logic of segregation is just the logic of eugenics, and by extension, genocide, on a long enough timeline as separation leads to concentration, concentration leads to confinement, and confinement leads to genocide. "Slow violence," to borrow Rob Nixon's apt term, is still very much violence.⁶⁰ Race and space, as implied throughout, are two ways of saying the same thing. *Native Son* takes this line of thinking to its logical conclusion. And, not only that, but it does so long before James Baldwin famously described urban renewal as "Negro removal"⁶¹ (42).

THE REWRITING AND CULMINATION OF NATURALISM IN *NATIVE SON*

Yet, a number of difficulties arise at the same moment that the novel's naturalism would seem to reach its pinnacle. Stylistically, as we have seen, the novel's naturalist elements become weighted with its associations with eugenics and a politics of racial 'purity.' The black nationalism often associated with Wright's work⁶² would here seem to be either a kind of doppelganger of naturalism's association with white nationalism or a term that does not apply to *Native Son*. Based on the imagined audience of *Native Son*, the latter seems to be the more likely possibility.⁶³ But, the problems introduced here are far more substantial than questions of style, audience, or even the oddity of black naturalism.

⁶⁰ For more on "slow violence," see Nixon.

⁶¹ See *Conversations with James Baldwin*, 1989.

⁶² In part, this is because critics tend to read his essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" as foundational for understanding his body of work rather than a particular phase or part of it. His "Personalism" essay came out the same year.

⁶³ Bigger understands that "no white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections "where it had been decided that black people might live" (248-49).

For, this moment shows that if segregation is just eugenics on long enough timeline, including its sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit tendency to become genocide, the question of blame becomes of paramount concern. Naturalism here starts to feel particularly strained since the determinism at its heart points to the inadequacy of the world *in toto* rather than particular actors in it. Said differently, the naturalist, in searching for ultimate causes and attempting to give an account of how their worlds function, often places blame on a system (in a nigh-metaphysical way) rather than a particular actor. Thus, whether we are reading Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Norris's *The Octopus*, or Wright's introduction to *Black Metropolis*, we find the language of "force" and "Environment": abstractions that gesture towards all the concrete processes that make up a given system. But, such terms are even more generic than that: they are just the idea of a system itself. The question then becomes what makes up that system. In classic naturalist texts like *Sister Carrie* and *The Octopus*, those systems are driven by the rise of consumer culture and monopoly capitalism, respectively.

Consequently, classic naturalist texts are apt to focus on capital rather than capitalists.⁶⁴ For example, S. Behrman, the capitalist villain of *The Octopus*, seems momentarily victorious following the Mussel Slough Tragedy, but shortly thereafter dies as he is absorbed into his product after falling into a grain elevator. What is interesting about this thinking is that, for a time, the capitalist will represent capital (S. Behrman representing the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad), but that same capitalist will be subject to it. Therefore, representationally, and in actuality, that relation can be severed, in this case, through the death of the capitalist. Even

⁶⁴ I do not mean to suggest that naturalism does not focus on holding the powerful accountable. Certainly, naturalism's longstanding association with muckraking proves that naturalist texts are often interested in doing just this. What I am suggesting, instead, is that when naturalist texts do attempt to hold the powerful accountable it will often feel at odds with its focus on the systemic and deterministic, which, I take to be one of naturalism's most defining features. In such texts, as we have noted, environment determines all. Given naturalism's interest in the determining nature of the environment, the way to change outcomes is to change the environment. One implication of this is that naturalism is, on its face, more interested revolution than reform.

capitalists are subject to the dictates of capital, so the logic goes. In such cases, capital, that is, the totality of a system, is always primary. This certainly makes sense, but such concentration on systems can easily turn into its own form of purity: nothing less than a full-scale revolution will do. I do not necessarily mean to argue with the primacy of capital over capitalists or with naturalism's focus on the systemic; each has their place.

But, such claims feel a bit at odds with *Native Son*, given what eugenics actually is: an *artificial* form of selection (separating society into groups of 'strong' and 'weak,' encouraging the 'strong' to procreate, discouraging the 'weak' from doing so, and, often, tending towards genocide). Nature or the economy (represented in naturalistic language), would, in this sense, not be sorting and selecting 'naturally.' The artificiality of eugenics (and, by extension, segregation) means that it is not necessary to the functioning of the social organism (that is, it is not, natural or endemic to the system itself). This idea should, in part, strike us as obvious (as in, "of course, eugenics is not necessary"). But, that same idea should also show us that segregation, like eugenics, introduces something into the system which is not 'native' to it, in the name of preserving the 'purity' of that system (i.e. the social organism), a totality that can be understood to be at least somewhat contingent. To be clear, as both segregation and eugenics are not forms of 'natural selection,' they are introduced into a system at one point by someone or something. This does not mean that, (1) the artificiality of this selection does not arise from the conditions of the system (that is, it does not arise spontaneously or from outside of history), or (2) that there is some sort of prelapsarian totality that was wholly unconstructed in a 'state of nature.' Rather, what is important here is that the artificiality itself that clues us in to moments in which something is added to a system, who or what is doing the adding to it, and whose interests are

served by that addition. And, it should be obvious that just because this form of selection is artificial does not make its consequences any less real.

Wright's worry here is that in moving beyond what William James would call "proximate causes" to "ultimate causes," naturalism's tendency to focus on the systemic can run the risk of making three key errors: (1) taking the current state of a system to be its 'natural' one (that is, we see the economy as a 'state of nature'⁶⁵ rather than a set of constructions designed for the benefit of certain parties over others); (2) missing opportunities for justice right in front of our face (i.e. to hold accountable those who have created and benefitted from said construction); and, (3) at the very least, misunderstanding contingency to be necessity. We will treat each of these in turn as we examine how the novel begins to not only modify, but separate itself from some aspects of naturalism.

We see the novel begin to separate itself from classic naturalism in moments that texts attempt to represent a system in totalizing terms. To represent totality, classic naturalist texts often turned to the metaphysical. Thus, Norris ends *The Octopus* with a rewriting of *Romans* 8:

Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickednesses, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.

Norris leaves his readers with a view of an incomprehensible totality that is nothing if not cosmic.⁶⁶ In Wright's essay on "personalism," he likewise identifies Dreiser with the

⁶⁵ I do not mean to suggest that there are economies that are not constructed (the so-called 'state of nature'); rather, I simply mean to suggest that, for Wright, focusing on the systemic can, though need not, run the risk of naturalizing the historical.

⁶⁶ For a reading of totality and the turn to the cosmic in contemporary novels with naturalist features, see McClanahan.

metaphysical, while taking into account the latter's more cynical bent: "Dreiser tried to rationalize and justify the defeat of the individual in biological terms. With him it was a law of the universe. It was fate" (1). Whether the terms come from Christian theology's obsession with the problem of evil (Norris) or Greek tragedy's insistence on "fate" (Dreiser), determinism speaks to totality that is no respecter of persons ("Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved"; "Dreiser tried to rationalize and justify the defeat of the individual . . . with . . . the law of the universe[,] . . . fate"). In fact, individuals are of little concern here.⁶⁷

Compare the former treatment of totality with Wright's as Bigger turns to the same sort of metaphysical language to describe the rentier: "Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god" (174). In part, Bigger's characterization of Mr. Dalton confirms Szalay's observation that elsewhere Wright "conflates financial success with literal elevation" as the rentier's command over social space derives in part from ownership (251). But, this moment also keeps the representation of the metaphysical within a particular material relation: that of the rentier and renter. Dalton is then "like a god" because he is a so-called 'slum-lord,' a term which originated a few years before the novel's release. If Norris and Dreiser are content to represent totality as an incomprehensible "force," Wright is not. Rather, Wright finds totality in the particular in much the same way that Friedrich Engels, according to Cappetti, understood "the slum" to "encompass[] the economy of the whole society" (34). For, even Wright's totality is intended to make the seemingly incomprehensible, comprehensible.

⁶⁷ The last section of *Native Son*, too, is titled "Fate." But, the novel does not understand itself to be determined in quite the same way as works of classic naturalist texts, given that it pairs its naturalism with "personalism" and defamiliarizes the terms of naturalism.

Wright's penchant for demystification at the moment most texts are most mystifying, here, specifically arises out of the nature of restrictive covenants themselves, which rendered social space and the designers of that space simultaneously visible and opaque. The logic behind this move is that such relations are already mystifying enough, so adding to that sense of mystification would only make matters worse.⁶⁸ As Mitchell Duneier notes, "while restrictive covenants appeared to be an individual and neighborhood-level practice, they were actually enforced by the work of powerful outside national organizations" (30). Such organizations included "[t]he National Association of Real Estate Board," which stipulated:

a realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood *a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality*, or any individuals whose presence will clearly be *detrimental to property values* in that neighborhood. . . . Realtors had no choice but to take such warnings seriously. Failure to adhere to the Code of Ethics could lead to loss of membership and, in practical terms, their firm's inability to function. (Duneier 30, emphasis added)

Though restrictive covenants were backed at the national level, this backing was less readily apparent than the localized result: housing segregation. Duneier writes,

a restrictive covenant could only be detected by its overall results—unless you were a black family that was trying to buy the 'wrong house'. . . . Though. . . restrictive covenants had a powerful impact, they were hard to track . . . it was only by plotting one deed after another on a map that a researcher could identify the precise locations of the invisible barriers that sealed blacks in place. (30-31)

Another way of saying that restrictive covenants "were hard to track" and "could only be detected by its overall results," but still "had a powerful impact" is that the consequences of restrictive covenants were more apparent than their causes.

⁶⁸ Further mystification would then do the opposite of what Wright found helpful about Urban Sociology: such texts created a "concrete vision of the forces" that molded the urban Negro's body and soul . . . that would allow blacks "to interpret correctly the meaning of their own actions" within a particular context.

Here, too, we find another way in which restrictive covenants, figured in the novel as the curtain and its cognates, shares features of the naturalist form: both foreground consequences more than individual actors, the systemic over the pragmatic and the local, or using the language of James, the “ultimate” over the “proximate.” But, again, this is as much the introduction of a problem as a solution to one. We remember that Bigger knows that he and his family cannot rent a flat other than in the sections “where it had been decided that black people might live” (248-49). In this quote, for example, Bigger notes the result of restrictive covenants, the spatially segregated city, but not the cause: the regime of accumulation of made possible by the structural incentives of real estate, including the creation of restrictive covenants. In Bigger’s description, the cause is made opaque at least three times over: (1) we do not see the moment at which the restrictive covenant is created; (2) the individuals who create those covenants are hidden (and are therefore not embodied); and (3) the sentence is written in the passive-voice. This opacity is indicative of the ways in which the structural dynamics of housing effectively hide the restrictive covenant creator from view (in this case the rentier), making rental practices and social space more broadly appear ‘natural,’ the product of economic “laws,” rather than constructions designed to serve a particular set of material interests. Duneier observes, “the restrictive covenant was invisible to the eye and created the illusory impression that the segregation it created was based on happenstance, market forces, or individual preferences” (31).

Restrictive covenants, then, markedly impact the construction of social space while rendering invisible and therefore immune to criticism those who construct that space. If we return to Bigger’s characterization of Mr. Dalton as “high up, distant, like a god,” we see in this description a suggestion of the physical distance between renter and rentier. But, equally important is the nature of that distance. That is, the distance between the renter and rentier is

vertical. This vantage point allows the rentier to view the whole of social space. Moreover, the great height from which the rentier views social space indicates his mastery of it, including his knowledge of the processes (like restrictive covenants) that led to the creation of that space and the processes by which it can be altered in the future. To see from such a great height, is to see social space as, at once, a product and a process. The rentier's greatest power, of course, derives not from his ability to understand social space, but to alter that space all the while remaining invisible (disembodied as a "god") and therefore immune to criticism.

Yet, if social space is segregated most effectively by hiding the mechanisms and interested parties that constructed said space, the novel seems equally intent on exposing those mechanisms and interested parties. Mr. Dalton, who owns and "formulates the policies" of the company to which the Thomas family pays rent (the South Side Real Estate Company) is one such interested party (326). But, here the representational problems enter again: naturalism, as we noted, tends to focus on systems rather than actors and capital rather than capitalists. If we return once more to Bigger's characterization of Mr. Dalton as "high up, distant, like a god," we can start to see how this riddle is solved. In the novel, Dalton, as a "god," is both an "impersonal force" (specifically, an embodiment of white real estate capital) and a person; to expose the mechanisms and interested parties that constructed the city is, then, to acknowledge that that some of the impersonal⁶⁹ "forces" that shape the city are, paradoxically, persons, not just persons as types.⁷⁰ Here, we can begin to see how Wright takes the language of naturalism to its absolute

⁶⁹ For an account that traces the novel's interest in impersonalism to Wright's liberalism and the invention of the welfare state, see Szalay's *New Deal Modernism* 201-55.

⁷⁰ Compare this language with that found in *The Octopus*: "you are dealing with forces . . . not with men" (qtd. in Michaels 200).

limit, defamiliarizing that language to such an extent that its terms of reference become almost unrecognizable.

Though naturalism affords Wright a language and a framework to describe the processes that govern the social, the novel suggests that that language can obscure our understanding of the social and protect those who have shaped it for their benefit. The novel makes this claim, in part, by ventriloquizing the language of naturalism through the figure of the rentier at the moment he is asked about the particulars of his real estate business and his involvement with it. During the trial, Boris Max (Bigger's lawyer), asks Mr. Dalton, "Isn't it true you *refuse* to rent houses to Negroes if those houses are in other sections of the city" than the Black Belt (327)? Mr. Dalton answers in the affirmative, but qualifies his answer by saying that restrictive covenants are "an old custom" (327). This response should already strike us as somewhat odd given that capitalists so often rely on the language of free choice, which both creates the impression that they are heroes in their own story and implies that one's lot is solely determined by such choices rather than structures designed and shaped for their benefit. Dalton goes on to say that he "didn't make the custom" or "originate" it (327).⁷¹ Though Dalton did not create the idea of a restrictive covenant, as the person in charge for making company policy, he does use and benefit from them. Still, he uses the language of "origins" and "customs" to defend himself. "Custom," here, becomes the generic banner under which the specific exploitative and discriminatory housing practices of the rentier class are obscured and justified. Dalton articulates a defense of price gouging in much the same way: Max asks Dalton, "Why is it that you charge the Thomas family

⁷¹ According to this ethos, Dalton considers himself absolved from any responsibility for actions that he did not directly originate. If we were convinced by such reasoning, very little would fall within the realm of ethics. Only "new" acts could ever be unethical. Once the first person, for example, committed a murder, every subsequent murder would be amoral, at worst. Dalton's support of the state in prosecuting Bigger further demonstrates the hollowness of such arguments.

and other Negro families more rent for the same kind of houses than you charge whites?’ ‘I don’t fix the rent scales,’ Mr. Dalton said. ‘Who does?’[asks Max]. ‘Why, the law of supply and demand regulates the price of houses’” (326). Again, Dalton defends himself and his business practices (here, restrictive covenants and price gouging) with recourse to external, impersonal mechanisms.

Certainly, Dalton appeals to external, impersonal mechanisms as a way of deflecting responsibility for his actions and dodging Max’s implicit charge that the former’s housing policies are racially discriminatory, but the language Dalton uses is also significant: “origins” and “laws” are foundational to the language of naturalism in the genre’s interest in causes and the processes that govern a system, respectively. As we noted in the last chapter, naturalism must, in an attempt to give an account of everything that makes up its world, rely on the short-hand of the baggiest and most capacious categories like types, tropes, and conventions, or, using Dalton’s language, “customs.” It makes little difference that “the law of supply and demand” is not a real law, the novel suggests, because the language of “laws” itself abstracts from social reality the moment it names the concrete process that make up social reality and moves away those who benefit from those processes. The worry, here, is that the language of naturalism can be (and often is) appropriated by those who benefit from the status quo.⁷² More pointedly, the language of “laws,” “customs,” and “origins” is the precise justification Dalton uses to profit off of black death.

As Max challenges Dalton’s language of “origins,” “customs,” and “laws,” the language of naturalism is rendered inadequate to the complexity with which race and housing; systems and particular actors within those systems; and determinism and contingency are framed in the novel.

⁷² To give two such examples, this often takes the form of naturalizing the historical or using the idea and language of “survival of the fittest.”

As we have noted, we see this dynamic play out most clearly at naturalism's limits: the destruction of black life by forces outside of their control in the collapse of one kind of infrastructure (housing), which is, at the same time, the basis for another kind of infrastructure (the structural relation of the rentier and the renter).

We might expect the culmination of naturalist form, which is to say, the logical end point of a world defined by systems designed for the benefit of white wealth at the expense of black death, to be expressed through the language of determinism or laws, for example, passive-voice sentence constructions characteristic of naturalist writing. Drake and Cayton, sounding like naturalist novelists, do just this: “[h]ousing is allowed to deteriorate and social services are generally neglected” (113). Yet, Wright, in contrast to Drake and Cayton, distances himself from the language of naturalism when describing this same phenomenon. Rather than describe the collapse of infrastructure, that is, segregation taken to its extreme in the form of genocide, in the passive voice, Wright has Bigger describe his experiences of the world as a constant barrage of violence intended to “choke [him] off the face of the earth” (353). Bigger reports that those who want him to die, whites who “own everything” (353), will effectively murder him twice, first, by suffocation and second, by being moved “off the face of the earth.” The “first” murder, suffocation, negates his voice while the “second” removes his body from space.⁷³ Interestingly, Wright reinstates a form of agency at the moment naturalism reaches its conclusion in death. That agency is directly related to ownership (whites who “own everything”). Yet, the moment naturalism reaches its logical conclusion ends with two forms of black death: first, social death (the loss of one's voice as a citizen) and second, physical death. In the image of Bigger's two

⁷³ For a similar reading of Mary's death, see Jan Mohamed, who suggests “Mary,” too, “is murdered not once, but twice,” by Bigger “choking” her in her room and then by “burn[ing]” her body “in the furnace” (98). Like Bigger, Mary is suffocated (“choking”) and removed from space (being burned).

deaths, Wright imagines naturalism to result not just in the loss of black life, but likewise the ability to meaningfully respond to that death through social engagement: using one's voice either as a form of protest or through the political process. With no voice, with no particular bad actors (as discussed previously), Wright suggests, we have no recourse to hold the powerful accountable in the meantime between our current moment and the moment a system is overturned, replaced, or reformed, whatever the case may be.

Unlike Drake and Cayton, Wright suggests that the deterioration of housing and therefore black death is neither the result of negligence nor of natural process that occurs independent of an agent. We can, in fact, draw a straight line from rentiers like Dalton creating restrictive covenants to the eventual collapse of infrastructure: (1) rentiers like Dalton create (and encourage the creation of) restrictive covenants in spaces outside of the Black Belt; (2) upon "confining" the black population to the Black Belt, said rentiers would "convert[]" single family homes into multiple apartments and kitchenettes; (3) "these conversions" quickly led to the "decay of housing"; (4) said housing would not be maintained or rehabilitated by the owner; and (5) the housing would collapse, resulting in the possible death of the inhabitants.⁷⁴ Without the rentier's efforts to maximize profit, the text suggests, this infrastructural collapse would likely not occur. The uneven deterioration of infrastructure (and the resultant precarity of black life) in Chicago then results from the way spaces have been constructed through material practices (such as restrictive covenants) in order to aid in the ongoing accumulation of white wealth at the expense of black life.

⁷⁴ Rothstein notes, "A 1946 national magazine article . . . recounted another case where rents were so high that thirty-eight people lived in a six-room apartment, sleeping in three shifts. In 1947, after a Chicago landlord converted his property from white to black tenancy, a fire killed ten African American tenants. The inquest revealed that a white tenant who had been paying fifteen dollars a month was evicted so that the landlord could charge a black family sixty dollars for the same apartment. Such exploitation was possible only because public policy denied African Americans opportunities to participate in the city's white housing market."

This goes some way in explaining how the novel could still find blame with an individual even as it offers a view of the social as structurally determined for its black inhabitants. That is, those who construct said structures play an outsized role in the social, making them less products of their environment than producers of it. Too, as the government had decided that restrictive covenants were an individual process, it is intuitive that Wright would specifically find fault with an individual. Whiteness in the novel ultimately becomes associated with agency (the ability to construct a world and benefit from that construction) while blackness is associated with determinism.⁷⁵ As Bigger says of another kind of “law,” “I’m just black and they make the laws” (353). In constructing worlds, Dalton, despite being placed in a naturalist text is, like Hurstwood before him, more of a realist character. The implication of this is that characters like Dalton (that is, those who construct the social world for their own benefit) can be held accountable for their actions because they exhibit agency (here, as a real estate ‘agent’).

THE LIMITS OF NATURALISM IN *NATIVE SON*

As much as *Native Son* succeeds in repurposing naturalism via its engagement with urban sociology, once the novel takes naturalism to its absolute limit, defamiliarizing the genre to the point that it is hardly recognizable (as it makes persons synonymous with impersonal forces and shifts the focus to persons instead of just systems), it becomes clear that naturalism alone does not represent the complexity of the novel. The language of determinism (“laws,” “forces,” “environment,” and the like), so central to naturalism, will often seem like the perfect way to describe the social world of the segregated city. But, as much as the novel often seems to want to be a sociological document, it does not describe its social world with the detachment of a

⁷⁵ Such an interpretation confirms Szalay’s reading of Wright’s support for a paternalistic form of liberalism. Still, we will see how the novel complicates Wright’s interest in liberalism in the section on “personalism.”

sociologist. Bigger, at one point, “groped for neutral words, words that could convey information but not indicate any shade of his own feelings,” but does not find such a language (73). To return to two of the many examples we have already discussed, Bigger says at different points: “I’m just black and they make the laws”; and, “[t]hey draw a line and say for you to stay on your side of the line. They don’t care if there’s no bread over on your side. They don’t care if you die. . . . you try to come from behind your line they kill you” (351). Here, the novel, gesturing towards the idea of determinism, is explicitly discussing subject matter fitting of sociology (social death, legislation, the carceral system, and the segregated city), but the language with which it discusses that subject matter is suffused with anger and mourning.

While novel’s sociological impulse is characteristic of much naturalistic writing, that sense of anger and mourning is not necessarily a defining feature of the genre. We can see the difference between the two most clearly by comparing the language used to describe determinism in classic naturalist texts like *Sister Carrie* with that of *Native Son*. Despite Carrie’s exploitation, for example, the narrator tells us: “We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail.” Unlike *Sister Carrie*’s sometimes detached, sometimes celebratory tone, you can almost hear the mourning in Bigger’s voice (“I’m just black and they make the laws”). Said differently, the tone of *Sister Carrie* suggests that determinism is either just a fact of life or a reality to be embraced while the “claustrophobia” of *Native Son* suggests that determinism is itself a live problem and one that cannot be simply accepted (Szalay 252). The subject position of these two writers is certainly not immaterial to this difference in tone. The language of determinism, and therefore that of naturalism, in Wright’s hands, ends up not just describing the world (with the detached language of the sociologist), but how it feels to be “battered and taunted” by that world. Yet, as classic

naturalist texts like *Sister Carrie* make clear, the language of “laws,” “forces,” and “environments” does not necessarily entail placing a premium on feeling. Neither does such language lend itself to ascribing agency to certain actors within that system nor to the possibility of changing the “laws” that govern a system. At the same time, the language of determinism will prove inadequate as one who is “battered and taunted” by the world cannot help but feel that the world need not be as it is. Said differently, the awareness of determinism becomes the grounds for imagining a world beyond its current state, that is, to imagine the possibility of that world being contingent, if for no other reason than “laws” change.

PERSONALISM AND PERMEABILITY IN *NATIVE SON*

To resolve these problems (and the others outlined in the intro), Wright complements the novel’s repurposed naturalism with what he calls a “personalist aesthetic.” “The basic unit of personalist creation,” Wright lets us know, “will be the image, that is, an emotional perception of reality. The unity, emotional and philosophic, of these images will constitute the ruling symbol of the work. This symbol, constituted of images born of emotional perception will carry, organically embedded within it, the message or judgement of the writer” (4). For Wright, “personalism” mediates between “emotional perception” and “reality.” These two terms, for Wright, are “organically” related and therefore imply a “unity” of the “emotional” and philosophic[al],” of fact and feeling, or, to use John Dewey’s famous formulation, *Experience and Nature*.⁷⁶ Naturalism’s attempt to describe society is thus complemented with personalism’s attempt to “dramatize[the individual’s] conflict with society in emotional terms, basically pessimistic” (1). While Wright’s comment on “the basic unit of personalist creation” refers to a

⁷⁶ For more on the novel’s tendencies towards the subjective and the objective, see Szalay’s *New Deal Modernism* 201-55.

work as a whole, in its reliance on organicist thought, it also refers to the smallest part, “the image” or “symbol.”

The “image” that comes to figure the presence of “personalism” in the novel is likewise the curtain; for, while the curtain’s function as a boundary or limit maps onto the novel’s naturalism (including its exploration of social space created, in part, by restrictive covenants), the curtain’s permeability, fluidity, and sensuous qualities map onto the novel’s “personalist aesthetic.” Said differently, if the curtain’s function as a boundary points primarily to the novel’s attempt to describe the social world in objective, concrete terms, the curtain’s sensuous qualities points primarily to the novel’s attempt to convey how it feels to live in that world (i.e. affective experience) and to navigate the less rigidly defined social practices of that world.

The opening scene is again instructive in unpacking the dynamics named by the curtain, this time, through the lens of “personalism.” In the opening scene as the narrator tells us: “Vera went behind the curtain and Bigger heard her trying to comfort his mother. He shut their voices out of his mind. . . . His mother’s voice floated to him in song” (10). Though Bigger wants to “shut their voices out of his mind,” the tight living quarters and soft material of the curtain does not permit him to do so. The sense of division enabled by the curtain is somewhat tenuous in the kitchenette as “the odor of frying bacon and boiling coffee drifted to him from behind the curtain” (10). In the kitchenette, the sensuous experience of one type of living space (the kitchen) moves into another (the bedroom). While the curtain divides, it also connects one space (the kitchen) with another (the bedroom) by virtue of its permeability. These two spaces (the kitchen) and (the bedroom) are then connected within a larger whole: the same “rat-infested room,” which, as we have noted, is a representation of Chicago (173). Likewise, unlike a solid wall, the curtain can be “swept . . . aside,” though doing so would mean that one risks violating the gender

norms the curtain is intended to preserve (4). The curtain, a response to the family's lack of space, is secondary to the bleak conditions themselves that give rise to it, conditions outlined in the naturalism section of this chapter. On the one hand, then, the curtain is a direct reflection of the material conditions under which the family lives (the construction of the room with curtain down the center, we noted, is a reference to segregated housing and the "cut-up" apartments that restructured and ultimately destroyed black space); that is to say, the appearance of said curtain is symptomatic and determined by those conditions. On the other hand, the family does create an additional room (without adding any square feet) out of a single room; this additional room, made possible by the curtain, is, in a very immediate sense, improvised. The curtain, as a form, is thus necessary *and* contingent. This subtle improvisation, which can only be understood in light of the material conditions that necessitated it, is a form of reappropriation of the original terms with which we understood the curtain: as a reflection of naturalist form and of materialist determinism.

While inside the room the curtain is intended to preserve gender norms, outside the room the curtain's sensuous qualities map onto the color-line as both embody a more tenuous form of division than housing segregation. The "color-line," Drake and Cayton note, "marks Negroes off as a *segregated* group deemed undesirable for free association with white people in many types of relationships (101). For Drake and Cayton, the color-line reflects efforts to limit "association" between whites and blacks. "The color-line," however, "is not static; it bends and buckles and sometimes breaks. . . . In Midwest Metropolis, [black residents] have a much wider area of 'freedom to come and go.' The city is not plastered with signs pointing COLORED here and WHITE there" (101-02). The color-line's attempt to limit "association" is then less an outright

prohibition than an unspoken rule. Yet, the fact that the color-line is unspoken and unstable (“it bends and buckles”) does not mean the consequences of violating it are any less serious.

As Drake and Cayton let us know, it is the very instability of the color-line that causes this “tension” (101). “Bathing beaches and swimming pools,” they found, are “among the primary tension points” (104). This tension reached a breaking point with the Chicago riot of 1919 which “began . . . as a result of an altercation at a bathing beach. A colored boy swam across the *imaginary line* which was supposed to separate Negroes from whites at the Twenty-ninth Street beach. He was stoned by a group of white boys. During the ensuing argument between groups of Negro and white bathers, the boy was drowned” (Drake and Cayton 65-66, emphasis added). In the water, the distinction between black space and white space is rendered ambiguous. Without a clear demarcation between these spaces, the water (as the space that both groups occupy) becomes, however obliquely, integrated. Notably, both the ostensible justification for the murder (crossing a boundary) and the means by which the murder was carried out (drowning) are related to the fluidity of the boundary (“the imaginary line”) and the fluidity of the material (water). The fluidity of the color-line, its tendency to “bend[] and buckle[] and sometimes break[],” creates the possibility for the integration of black and white spaces, rendering the hierarchical arrangement of social space subject to change. And, yet it is the very possibility of integration and the reconstruction of social space against which whites would violently reject. While we might read this example as not representative of the usual danger of crossing the color-line either because this example relates to leisure time or because riots did not happen every day, the novel makes clear that this danger was constitutive of everyday life for blacks in Chicago who had to cross the color-line for employment.

Thus, in *Native Son*, Bigger's initial reason to venture outside of the Black Belt, and thereby, to cross the color-line, is the promise of a job. Bigger, here, is representative of a large segment of the black population in Chicago. As Drake and Cayton let us know, "Hundreds of Negroes find it necessary to go into white communities daily in order to earn a living . . . in [various] roles" (195). In the novel, Bigger leaves the Black Belt for work, like a number of other inhabitants, because of the relative dearth of jobs in the Black Belt itself. Wright, as usual, explicitly situates his protagonist's actions and experiences in a particular material context. When Bigger first walks from the Black Belt to the Dalton's house in affluent Hyde Park, he thinks to himself, "[s]uppose a policeman saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody . . . He could have stayed among his own people and escaped feeling this fear and hate" (44). This moment again reflects a common phenomenon experienced by a large segment of black population in Chicago as Drake and Cayton show that, though venturing out of the Black Belt was a common practice, when black workers would enter "white neighborhoods they [we]re viewed with hostility or suspicion. . . . In areas close to the Black Belt, . . . police have been known to adopt a policy of stopping Negroes . . . and questioning them" (197). Though the partial fluidity of the color-line allows Bigger, like other inhabitants of the Black Belt, the "freedom to come and go," this freedom is circumscribed by narratives of black criminality.⁷⁷ As Khalil Gibran Muhammad has shown, such narratives were not wholly immaterial as they were backed by the state and made to appear objective through the ascent of crime statistics in sociology. These narratives, then, force Bigger to confront himself "through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 8). Here, I follow James Nagel who suggests that the figure of the curtain can be read in light of W. E. B. Du Bois's notions of "the

⁷⁷ For more on this, see Muhammad, and Murakawa's *The First Civil Right*.

veil” and “double consciousness” (88). In the passage above, Bigger’s “second-sight” allows him to anticipate how he would likely be seen in Hyde Park, that is, as a criminal, or, in the sometimes racist imaginary of naturalism, a “brute” (8). We will return to the novel’s repurposing of “second-sight” momentarily.

TYPE AND *NATIVE SON*

For now, it is important to note that type returns in *Native Son* as narratives of black criminality reduce Bigger to a stereotype, narratives that are backed by the power of the state (“[s]uppose a policeman saw him”). As we noted in the last chapter, type is an overarching preoccupation in naturalism, whether that be in the study of nature, sociology, or culture. While type and stereotype, in particular, point to state-backed racism, they also arise from the text as a representation. That is, as Wright places Bigger’s actions within the context of a larger group⁷⁸ and the context of employment, Wright, again performing the kind of work one might expect of a sociologist, using a representational strategy associated with naturalism, makes Bigger a type. The novel shows its awareness of this problem in separating Bigger as one type (a laborer) to the type he is perceived to be (a criminal). But, the problem of type remains. Though there is a certain inescapability of the relation of the individual to the group in questions of representation, that inescapability itself arises from organicist thought (the fundamental idea of which is the unity of the part and the whole, with each only understood in relation to one another), of which naturalism and sociology are paradigmatic examples.⁷⁹ The part and the whole is thus a central problem of naturalism and sociology.

⁷⁸ For more on the importance of the group in the novel, see Szalay and Cappetti.

⁷⁹ This is, of course, a burden of representation whites have not had to bear in the same way. For more on this, see Muhammad.

The fact that this is problem can be traced to organicist thought is as much the introduction to a problem as a solution to one; for, this moment puts pressure on the relation of the part to the whole as the sociological work of the novel and its naturalist elements have a sometimes explicit, sometimes latent tendency to dovetail with other toxic representations of groups.⁸⁰ In the explicitly racist world of the novel and that of its era, toxic representations (like the “brute”) were commonplace; we need look no further than the crowds who dehumanize Bigger by referring to him in animalistic terms. Reading the novel would at the very least entail bringing awareness of those representations with you. Bigger, as we have noted, is certainly aware of these toxic understandings of blackness as he knows, for example, that he is condemned before he even steps foot in Hyde Park (“It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody”). A novel that would seem to align itself so forcefully with the sociological and the naturalistic (that is, with representations that rely on type) could easily be understood as reinforcing those representations. This is all to say that blackness carries with it so much baggage that it would be difficult disentangle all that baggage to see Bigger as a distinct character, made all the more difficult because of the novel’s naturalist elements, specifically, its tendency towards type.

And so, we arrive at the problem of personification, a problem that has long interested critics of naturalism. Walter Benn Michaels, Mark Seltzer, James Livingston, and Michael Fried, have each noted the genre’s interest in personifications over persons, types over distinct, rich characters. In naturalism, Michaels, Seltzer, and Livingston show, persons do not just exist (fully-formed entities), but are made via mechanical, natural, and discursive processes. These persons, too, can be unmade (as in the “brute” type). In reading these critics, it starts to seem as

⁸⁰ This is made worse by the totalizing accounts of sociology and naturalism that *can* tend towards totalitarianism.

if everything in a naturalist novel is personified except persons, given that the genre repeatedly reduces persons to things while it ascribes person-like qualities to things. Yet, naturalism itself does not solve the problem of personification and that of the individual and group. Perhaps, naturalism simply cannot solve the problem of the individual and group because of the organicist thought on which it rests. Thus, Wright turns to personalism, which, he suggests, “should have as its main burden and theme of posing the problem of the individual” (1).

The novel stages the problem of the individual and the group reflexively. The weighted quality of the relationship between the individual and the group becomes even more so when we take into account the fact that the interactions between Mary and Bigger come in the wake of a cultural imaginary that focused on protecting white female ‘purity’ from the invented threat of the black male rapist, which becomes the “brute” caricature who is characterized as being violent and animalistic.⁸¹ To be clear, this caricature is not simply a spontaneous cultural narrative, but one that arose during a particular material context: Reconstruction. Both white women and black men, in such a framework, represent incredibly weighted categories that exceed any particular white woman or black man. It then makes perfect sense that Wright would be wary of solely identifying Bigger with a group, especially given that such a group (the black male rapist) was always a fiction and one that provided the ideological basis for segregation and disproportionately targeting black men as criminals. Consider the following scene in this context. After driving a drunk Mary home, Bigger takes her upstairs to her room. The two drunkenly kiss, but are interrupted by the blind Mrs. Dalton. Knowing that Mrs. Dalton would think that Bigger being in Mary’s room meant that he had raped her, Bigger accidentally smothers her to death. Drawing our attention to the weightiness of this scene in the cultural imaginary, the narrator tells

⁸¹ For example, see D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, or, better yet, don’t.

us that Bigger “felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people” (84). The scene, Wright knows, cannot help but feel weighted, so the text explicitly makes the scene a product of representation: Bigger and Mary are described as on “a stage in front of a crowd of people.” The characters in this scene are therefore understood to be determined by that representation as Bigger “felt strange, possessed.” Further, it is both the group and the alignment of Bigger with the group that is determined in this scene. The effects of this determinism are disastrous. For, it is, in effect, cultural narrative of the black male rapist (that is tied to state-backed violence) that kills Mary and eventually Bigger; for, without it, Bigger need not hide the fact that he is in her room, which leads to her death and later his own. While Bigger’s actions here are not even close to perfect, he, unequivocally, does not rape Mary. This scene undermines the black male rapist fiction and sets in motion the consequences that arise from that narrative’s material context, but it also puts pressure on the more basic categories that Bigger and Mary are supposed to represent (a white woman and a black man) by staging this scene and these categories as representational problems, placing both characters “upon a stage in front of a crowd of people.” But, subtly undermining the relationship between the individual and the group is not enough to understand Mary and Bigger as characters in their own right (rather than simply types).

The novel undermines this relationship (between the individual and the group) by showing characters coming into contact with representations of other persons that are understood as a category before they come into contact with the actual person. We see the novel use this strategy in the case of both Bigger and Mary. We recall that when Bigger and Gus go to the theater to see *Trader Horn*, a newsreel plays “images of smiling, dark-haired white girls lolling on the gleaming sands of a beach,” including Mary Dalton who is described by the commentator

as “the naughty rich” (32). The news-reel commentator goes on to say that Mary has been recently seen “accepting the attentions of a well-known radical” (32). Throughout, the camera shows Mary in her bathing suit, at one point, focusing on her legs. In other words, the camera treats Mary as a sex object. With this imagery and the aforementioned descriptions, Bigger and Gus take this to mean that “white women’ll go to bed with anybody” (33).

This representation comes to inform Bigger’s understanding of who he thinks Mary is: a representation of wealthy white femininity associated with promiscuity, more an object of knowledge than a subject in her own right. Later, at the trial, Bigger’s lawyer, Max, says, Mary “was acting toward him in such a way as no white face usually acts toward a Negro, and as a white face acts only when it is about to fleece a Negro of something” (397). Whether the terms are sociological (“Negro”) or representational (“white face,” gesturing towards personification as a kind of mask), Max (whose name gestures to the founder of a political philosophy that makes much of categories)⁸² trades in the language of categories.

Those categories, based on the frequency (“usually”) of a term conforming to a pattern over time, the novel suggests, misses the particular, the persons. After his first interaction with Mary, Bigger thinks:

[S]he was the same girl he had seen in the movie. Never in his life had he met anyone like her. She puzzled him. She was rich, but she didn’t act like she was rich. She acted like . . . Well, he didn’t know exactly what she did act like. In all the white women he had met, mostly on jobs and at relief stations, there was always a certain coldness and reserve; they stoon their distance and spoke to him from afar. But this girl waded right in and hit him right between his eyes with her words and ways. . . . She responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she. And he had never felt that before in a white person. (51, 59, 65)

⁸² Here, I follow Barbara Johnson, who reads Max to be a surrogate for Marx.

As the passage makes clear, Bigger tries to understand Mary by placing her within a category (“rich” people, “white women,” “white person[s],” in general), but her actions do not fit neatly within Bigger’s understanding of those categories (“Well, he didn’t know exactly what she did act like”). Instead of the “coldness” he expects, there is warmth; instead of “distance,” there is familiarity (“She responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she”); and, instead of a generic object of knowledge (“the naughty rich” girl), Mary is described as a particular subject who acts (“[s]he acted . . . this girl waded right in and hit him right between his eyes with her words and ways”). If Mary is typical at all, it is only because “she did the unexpected *every minute*” (63, emphasis added). And yet, Bigger has, no doubt, had to use these categories to survive in an overtly racist world.

The novel undermines an understanding of Bigger as a type in much the same way. Despite their seemingly good intentions, Mary and her communist boyfriend, Jan, come into their interactions similarly associating Bigger with type. When the three characters are driving through the Black Belt, Mary says to Bigger, “‘You know, Bigger, I’ve long wanted to go into these houses,’ pointing to the tall, dark apartment buildings looming to either side of them, ‘and just *see* how your people live. . . . I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. . . . There are twelve million of them. . . . They live in our country’” (70). In Mary’s monologue, the particular “you” (“Bigger”) immediately becomes “your people” (“Negro”) and “these people” before finally turning into a “they” and a “them” (“twelve million of them”). Most basically, Mary’s monologue replaces individual identity with group identity, with the particular standing in for the group; this is the problem of personification and representation in miniature: to be the one and the “twelve million.” But, the movement from “your people” to “they” and “them” is even more interesting

as that movement not only replaces the particular “you” with that of the group (“your people”), but, at the same moment, distances Mary from Bigger as she is effectively talking about him like he is not even there (“there are twelve million of *them*”) (emphasis added).

This move indicates an additional layer of abstraction fitting of sociologist as it turns “Negro” into an object of knowledge (“I want to *know* these people”). In addition to its reliance on categories of group identity, this dialogue’s association with the sociological is made even more apparent as Mary is essentially describing canvassing houses (“I’ve long wanted to go into these houses”). This dialogue, fittingly, takes place the night Mary is supposed to be attending a “lecture at the University,” most likely, given the capitalization of “the University,” at the University of Chicago: the birthplace of Urban Sociology (52). This should make a certain amount of sense given that as much as urban sociology attempted to describe the forces shaping the city’s geography, it also attempted to study the city’s types, like “the criminal” and the “juvenile delinquent.”⁸³

For, the novel suggests that what Jan and Mary so obviously and painfully miss in such moments, and perhaps what urban sociologists would miss, is the person of Bigger Thomas: not the one and the “twelve million,” but the one in “twelve million,” flirting with the idea of black exceptionalism. Carla Cappetti suggests that we see the personhood of Bigger most manifest in “the lyricism of *Native Son* – in Bigger’s perception of sailboats, airplanes, and even of the inimical snow and violent water hose” (190). To give one such example of this lyricism, “there was in his eyes a pensive, brooding amusement, as of a man who had been long confronted and tantalized by a riddle whose answer seemed always just on the verge of escaping him, but prodding him irresistibly on to seek its solution. . . . ‘Half the time I feel like I’m on the outside

⁸³ For more on urban sociology’s engagement with criminality and ‘delinquency,’ see Cappetti’s *Writing Chicago* 73-107.

of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence” (17, 20). To fail to see Bigger’s “lyricism,” Cappetti suggests, “is to submit to the precisely dehumanized view of Bigger that caused *Native Son* to be written to begin with” (190). That dehumanized view would see Bigger as solely a category, a “brute,” a “criminal,” or a “juvenile delinquent.” In place of the caricature of the group, we might say, Wright give us a character.

Bigger is understandably upset by being treated as an object of knowledge by Mary and Jan. The narrator tells us that “Bigger knew that they were thinking of his life and the life of his people while “the car sped through the Black Belt, past tall buildings holding black life” (70). This recognition causes Bigger to think about “seiz[ing] some heavy object . . . and with one final blow blot it out – with himself and them in” the car (70). These lines suggest that Bigger’s violence is not a result of who he is (a member of a group or a caricature of that group), but of the sociological lens that would seek to know him by aligning him with the group; for, it is the occasion of being aligned with the group that Bigger thinks about being violent. Bigger’s logic here is that it is better to be annihilated than to be turned into an object of knowledge and identified with the group (“black life”). While the novel voices this concern through Bigger’s voice, it nevertheless allows Mary the chance “to *see* how your people live” and “to *know* these people,” interestingly, during the same evening that Bigger voices his concern as the three characters venture into the Black Belt. And, the novel itself, of course, begins by taking the reader “inside of a Negro home.” The novel then participates in knowledge production about the group at the same time that it expresses reservations about producing such knowledge. On the one hand, this moment shows the tension between naturalism (with its sociological emphasis) and “personalism” (in that it places supreme value on the individual), but, on the other, this moment also shows how naturalism and “personalism” complement one another.

PERSONALISM AND PEDAGOGY

For, what looks like naturalism's emphasis on demystification can also be read as the pedagogical quality of "personalism." That is, Wright objectifies his own "personal experience" of migrating to Chicago and living in kitchenette in the form of the novel that portrays the social structures that created these realities, he attempts, as the "personalist" writer, to as Finley C. Campbell notes, "transform[] his personal consciousness into a social consciousness" (18). For Campbell, this transformation is made possible by filtering the writer's "personal consciousness" through "a radical ideology, like socialism" (18). At once, then, "personalism will foster expression of protest in terms as individual and personal as possible" and "represent the highest intensity of social consciousness possible" (3). "Tho [*sic*] using a high emotional content," Wright lets us know, personalism's "aim and end will be beyond the mere power to move. It will seek to make those who come in contact with it take sides for or against certain moral issues" as a form of protest (4).

To do so, Wright suggests that "personalism" must "heighten the consciousness," that is, function as a form of social pedagogy (4). The question is then: "what does the novel teach?" We have already discussed the novel's deep engagement with the problem of segregated city, housing in particular, and the structural dynamics that underly that issue. Personalism's high "emotional content" gives us a clue. That is, the novel relates to the reader how it might feel to live under such oppressive conditions; here, too, naturalism's interest in the conditions that determine a given world and personalism's emphasis on feeling are figured as compatible. For our purposes, the final form of pedagogy the novel employs is one that attempts to place the reader within the novel's world and allow that reader not only "to *see*" the material conditions

and the impact those conditions have on the lives of others (materially and affectively), but to see themselves in relation to those conditions and those lives.

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY: RACE LIBERALS AND SENTIMENTAL READING PUBLICS IN *NATIVE SON*

In other words, the novel's "personalist aesthetic" seeks to confront the reader with an image of themselves and their relation to the world. Bigger's "second-sight" here becomes that of the reader. Only now that "sight" is no longer a necessary survival mechanism, but a simultaneously narcissistic and altruistic way of seeing oneself in relation to the world. As Szalay has shown, the imagined reader of *Native Son* is someone like Mary: a white liberal woman of some means who is part of the "sentimental" reading public (208). From a class standpoint, to the extent that the novel embodies a "personalist aesthetic," it would seem to confirm Szalay's reading as "[p]ersonalism represents the revolt of the petty bourgeoisie [writer] against the petty bourgeoisie [and] . . . the bourgeoisie" (Wright 4). And, Szalay is certainly correct in aligning Mary with sentimentality; for, after Bigger tells Jan and Mary about his father dying in a race riot and no one being held accountable for his death, Jan responds: "How do you *feel* about it? . . . That's what we Communists are fighting. We want to stop people from treating others that way. I'm a member of the Party. Mary *sympathizes*" (75, emphasis added). Even communism is understood in interpersonal terms ("We want to stop people from treating others that way"). And, to Jan, lynching is just an extreme form of mistreatment that causes undue emotional distress ("How do you *feel* about it?"; "Mary *sympathizes*").

Thus, the novel stages the reader's confrontation with herself largely through Mary's character as she, Jan, and Bigger venture into the Black Belt to "swe[e]p . . . aside" the curtain "to *see* how your people live"; the most general way that the novel has the reader confront

herself during this outing is by undermining Mary as the narrator provides the reader with access to narration and thoughts not privy to Mary, that is, through dramatic irony. To give two examples of the work that dramatic irony does in the novel: dramatic irony is used to undermine Mary's privilege as the narrator tells us that Mary was "pointing to . . . tall, dark apartment buildings" when she was telling Jan and Bigger that she has "long wanted to go into these houses," but somehow did not make time to do so despite her vast resources; the novel likewise uses dramatic irony to challenge Mary's tendency to turn persons into representations of larger groups as we learn that Bigger imagines "seiz[ing] some heavy object . . . and . . . blot . . . out . . . himself and them" when Mary discusses the lives of black Americans like Bigger is not present. The novel sums up such interactions through Bigger's thought that "[t]hese people made him feel things he did not want to feel" (68-69). Said differently, Mary and Jan were violating, what Arlie Hochschild would call, "feeling rules," without their knowledge⁸⁴ (563). Whether it be in Mary and Jan's specific violation of "feeling rules" or just the fact that the device of dramatic irony is used, the novel's staging of the reader's confrontation with herself is made possible by an emphasis on private perception and an underlying belief in the separation of one individual consciousness from another; this is the novel at its most liberal.⁸⁵ The result of this form of confrontation is that the reader is encouraged to see the individual instead of the group and to see how privilege distorts perception.

In addition to using dramatic irony to stage the reader's conflict with herself, the novel also stages this confrontation through the trip to the Black Belt itself. The drive into the Black Belt is occasioned by Mary's wanting to "*see* how [Bigger's] people live," but more specifically

⁸⁴ See Hochschild's "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure."

⁸⁵ Here, I both follow and depart from Szalay. While the novel does have liberal elements, in this reading, those elements are but one end of the novel's dynamics rather than the novel itself.

to go to “a *real* place . . . one of those places where colored people eat” and drink (69). In other words, the trip is related to Mary and Jan’s desire to consume ‘authentic’ black culture (“a *real* place), whether that is figured through sight (to “*see* how [Bigger’s] people live”) or taste (“one of those places where colored people eat”). What Wright’s staging of this moment shows is that the desire to slum it, to be a race tourist, is just a different form of the desire of white readers for black sentimental literature. And, the desire to “*see* how [Bigger’s] people live” is, in part, related to the desire of the race liberal who makes understanding the suffering of blacks (that is, turning race into an object of knowledge like a sociologist might) a precursor to politics. The novel somewhat satisfies both of these interrelated desires. Thus, confused at Mary and Bigger’s request, Bigger suggests one “Ernie’s Kitchen Shack” (69).

As the three characters drive through the Black Belt, we see how the novel challenges the desire of the sentimental reading public and that of the race liberal even as it somewhat satisfies said desire. The curtain is, here, momentarily “swept . . . aside.” We see this play out in the spatial dynamics of the scene, both inside the car (the arrangement of characters within the car) and outside it (as the group travels from Hyde Park to the Black Belt); in both cases, we witness different ways the color-line “bends and buckles and sometimes breaks.” Before touching on the spatial dynamics inside the car, it is worth discussing what it means for the group to venture into the Black Belt. Roderick A. Ferguson argues that the trip amounts to “transgressing the boundaries of racial segregation” (a brief crossing of the color-line) (50). However, this act is uneven in its perceived effects. “By asking [Bigger] to overstep the social boundaries of race,” Ferguson writes, “Jan and Mary presume they are demonstrating the racially progressive nature of communist party politics and thereby subverting Bigger’s socialization as a racialized minority and the hierarchy of 1930s America” (50). Taking a look inside the car, we

can see just how far “boundaries of racial segregation” are meaningfully “transgress[ed].” As a start, Bigger assumes that Mary and Jan have an ulterior motive.⁸⁶ Bigger wonders, “What good could they get out of sitting here making him *feel* so miserable” (70, emphasis added)? Again, it seems as though feeling and perception are what separate Bigger from Mary and Jan, despite their close proximity.

But, it is apparent that there are more interesting things going on here as Jan takes a turn at driving while all three characters are awkwardly piled in together in the front seat (rather than the white characters sitting as they usually would in the back seat), despite Bigger’s official job as the Daltons’ chauffeur. With Jan driving and all the characters sitting side-by-side in the front seat, Ferguson is correct to note that Jan and Mary assume that they are challenging the power dynamic of the chauffeur/client relationship. As Bigger is neither performing the job of being a chauffeur (at the moment) nor separated from Jan and Mary, the latter take this momentary redistribution of labour and the reconfiguration of the spatial dynamics in the car as a bid for equality in their interpersonal relations.

According to Jan and Mary, venturing into the Black Belt itself will enact a similar form of equality. So, too, does their attempt to treat him as an equal by having dinner with him, suggesting a likeness between consumption habits and social standing. Whether it be through venturing into the Black Belt, piling into the same front seat, having Jan drive, or inviting Bigger to eat dinner with them, Mary and Jan take such gestures as a prefiguration of their hopes for life “[a]fter the revolution” when “[t]here’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no

⁸⁶ Bigger’s intuition turns out to be at least partially correct in thinking that Jan and Mary have an ulterior motive as both express a desire to use African-Americans to further the cause of communism: “‘Say, Jan, do you know many Negroes? I want to meet some.’ ‘I don’t know any very well. But you’ll meet them when you’re in the Party.’ ‘They have so much emotion! What a people! If we could ever get them going....’ ‘We can’t have a revolution without ’em,’ Jan said. ‘They’ve got to be organized. They’ve got spirit. They’ll give the Party something it needs’” (77).

poor” (68). The novel somewhat reservedly welcomes equality of treatment in interpersonal relations as Mary, who gives Bigger a “guarded feeling of freedom,” is the first white person who “responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world” (65). Here, we find the ultimate goal of “personalism” – integration; for, “the personalist who becomes a perfect personalist ceases to be a personalist, and becomes an artist writing for and speaking to mankind” (5).

Yet, that is about as far as the novel is willing to go with how meaningful this “transgress[ion]” actually is. The image of the three characters piled in together is incredibly clunky and overtly parodic. The momentary redistribution of labor is just that, momentary. The group’s venture into the Black Belt is built on the assumption that the white characters will get to go home to Hyde Park at the end of the night. Bigger agrees to eat with Jan and Mary, but he only does so with great reluctance; before he finally decides to get out of the car and go into “Ernie’s” (the site of black consumption), fittingly, Mary cries for making him “feel badly” (72). Perhaps most tellingly, though, “the guarded feeling of freedom [Bigger] had while listening to [Mary] was tangled with the hard fact that she was white and rich, a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do” (65).

CAUSE AND AFFECT: FACT, FEELING, AND THE LIMITS OF RACIAL LIBERALISM

If we venture inside the car once more, we can see exactly why this problem of “fact” and “feeling” is so intractable. The narrator tells us that “[t]here were white people to either side of [Bigger]; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls” (67-68). We can tell that Bigger’s comfort is not of the utmost significance for the other characters because he is sitting in the middle seat, despite his height. More substantively, the narrator’s choice of the word, “looming,” as a description of Bigger’s experience of Jan and Mary as “white . . . walls,”

suggests a division between Bigger and the other characters at the exact moment that Mary and Jan are attempting to tear down racial walls through a micro form of integration. We might chock this up to another instance of focusing on private perception and individual feeling were it not for the novel's thorough engagement with racialized housing. The Daltons, we recall, own the company to which the Thomases pay rent. For Bigger to see "walls" on either side of him is to see those characters as representations of property, that is, as manifestations of real estate capital and the specific ways in which his life has been determined by it. The word, "looming," suggests that the walls are not static, but moving fluid structures.

Whether the novel uses the word, "looming," because it refers back to the curtain specifically, or because it reminds Bigger of the conditions under which he grew up, or because the hard assets of real estate are what provide the Dalton family liquid income for the current outing makes little difference in the face of black death, the end result of segregated housing. The meager tears Mary sheds upon arriving at "Ernie's Kitchen Shack" (a drop of liquidity returned to the Black Belt after draining wealth and life from it) are simply not enough.⁸⁷ Mary "responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she," but, of course, they do *not* live in the same world, so separated as they are by their differential access to resources. And, despite Mary seeing blacks as "*human[s]*," who "*must* live like we live" at "home," we know that Mary's pastoralization of the home is pure fantasy as the reader has witnessed life both in the Thomas family's kitchenette and in the Dalton's multi-story home in ritzy Hyde Park, a home paid for, in part, by the rent the Thomases pay to the Dalton's. To the sentimental reading public and that of race liberals, the novel argues, bids for interpersonal equality based on feeling are not enough. Any hope for equality, the novel suggests, involves

⁸⁷ Other such returns of liquidity take the form of the Daltons giving to the NAACP.

tearing down the walls that separate black from white and rich from poor: true integration, in the logic of the novel, is revolutionary: “[t]here’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor . . . [a]fter the revolution” (68). The particular relation of racialized housing in Chicago, the site of exploitation that most interests the novel, then returns as the site of universal hope. To get to life “after the revolution,” though, there must, in fact, be a revolution.

AMBIENT AND AMBIVALENT FEELING

Yet, as much as the materialism of the novel returns here in full-force, the novel still stages this return, in part, by satisfying the desire of the race liberal and the sentimental reading public (the desire to “*see* how [Bigger’s] people live”) even as it critiques that desire by confronting the reader with an image of themselves; and, though the novel suggests that feeling and interpersonal experience alone are insufficient on their own, it nevertheless carves out a place for each in its larger project. Most basically, the novel makes a place for feeling and interpersonal experience because it understands the former to bind together consciousnesses that are perceived to be separate under the rubric of the novel’s materialist framing. Specifically, both Mary and Bigger are bound together through shame: ““We’re not trying to make you feel badly[, Mary said]. . . . The way he had acted had made her cry, and yet the way she had acted made him feel that he had to act as he had toward her. In his relations with her he felt that he was riding a seesaw; never were they on a common level; either he or she was up in the air” (72). In part, this is a classic (if now clichéd) representation of the shame blacks are constantly made to feel by being confined to positions of servitude and the corresponding white guilt for this act, yet, the novel frames this affect as arising from then same material relation: segregated housing.

But, it is also more substantive than that as the passage suggests that feeling creates an affective environment in which one affective response triggers another (“The way he had acted

had made her cry, and yet the way she had acted made him feel that he had to act as he had toward her”) in a mechanical way similar to physics (“In his relations with her he felt that he was riding a seesaw; never were they on a common level; either he or she was up in the air”). The novel’s bio-mechanics of feeling is even more obvious as the narrator shows us the moment Mary starts to cry: “In the dim light of the street lamp Bigger saw her eyes cloud and her lips tremble. She swayed against the car. He stepped backward, as though she were contaminated with an invisible contagion” (72).

The way feelings work, here, as in the rest of the novel, might be understood to be a revision of the naturalist concept of a “force” that, in part, determines the composition of the “environment.” We see the upside of what the novel thinks this revision could do in the following monologue from Mary: “I want to work among Negroes. That’s where people are needed. It seems as though they’ve been pushed out of everything. . . . When I see what they’ve done to those people, it makes me so mad. . . . And I feel so helpless and useless. I want to *do* something” (76). In the passage, the desire of both the race liberal and that of the sentimental reading public (the desire to “*see* how [Bigger’s] people live”) – which turn out to be the same thing – and the reliance of both groups upon feeling, creates a coherent, if not wholly convincing, politics; that is, the race liberal and that of the sentimental reading public first sees oppression (“When I see what they’ve done to those people . . . It seems as though they’ve been pushed out of everything”), which provokes an affective response (“it makes me so mad. . . . I feel so helpless and useless”) that leads to action (“I want to *do* something”). “Tho [*sic*] using a high emotional content, [personalism’s] aim and end,” Wright lets us know, “will be beyond the mere power to move. It will seek to make those come in contact with it take sides for or against certain moral issues. . . . the act of expression must become an objective act, having implications

and consequences in the social sphere” (4). *Native Son*, of course, gives the reader a long hard look at black oppression, which would, according to this logic, lead to the same result: getting the reader “to *do* something” about that oppression. In our closing, we will turn to what the reader might be asked “to *do*.”

TWO ANSWERS TO A RIDDLE

Here, we can start to see the first way the novel resolves the problem of artistic legitimacy in light of its materialism; that is, writing, as a vehicle to provoke feeling and thereby action, becomes a “force” in the world. This line of thinking arises, in part, from the novel’s “personalism,” which sees writing in “functionalist” terms: “Personalism will be dynamic, functional . . . Its expression will become an objective act, having immediacy as its aim. . . . the act of expression must become an objective act, having implications and consequences in the social sphere. . . . Beauty will consist in the power of a given work to influence. The greatest novel will be that one which turns the world upside down” (4). Novels here become material forces in their own right, or as James Livingston suggests of pragmatist thought, words that are also things in the world.⁸⁸ The redefinition of “Beauty” as utility (“the power of a given work to influence”), too, is suggestive of pragmatism’s redefinition of truth as that which is useful. Wright’s idea that, “the act of expression must become an objective act, having implications and consequences in the social sphere. . . .the greatest novel will be that one which turns the world upside down,” most basically, implies that novels can and do have material effects. This is obviously the novel at its most pragmatist and its most ideological.

⁸⁸ This makes a certain amount of sense given that Wright’s introduction to *Black Metropolis* not only tells us about the influence of urban sociology on his own writing, but also references both John Dewey and William James.

While Wright's use of "personalist" thought might not be all that convincing to us as an account of the relationship between literature and history (that is, as an account of how writing might be squared with materialism), it leaves us with a number of the questions with which we began as, in this model, it might be clear what Wright understands the relationship between literature and its effects in the world to be, but it is not clear how artistic legitimacy might fit in such a model; that is, "personalism" gives us an answer to the riddle of materialism and literary consumption, but does not necessarily give us an answer to the riddle of materialism and literary production. Setting aside for a moment the fact that literary consumption and literary production exist in a larger organic relation, it is still the case that we have yet to uncover why Wright might have come to believe that writing itself was important beyond the obvious desire for this to be the case as a writer. Likewise, we have thus far seen Wright's account of textual agency (texts that have a given set of effects in the world), but not artistic agency. We have then yet to find an answer to writing and the problem of determinism.

These problems are different versions of the same question and can therefore be answered in the same way: by appealing to the relation with which we began, the role of the restrictive covenant in shaping the segregated city. Such covenants, we learned, were proliferated by individuals, neighborhoods ("property owners *associations*"), and national real estate organizations (emphasis added). Restrictive covenants, we noted, were instrumental in segregating the city (by literally reconstructing black and white spaces), increasing white wealth (through ownership of homes and rental properties), and maintaining and increasing black poverty (by not allowing blacks access to home ownership, and restricting areas of the city where blacks could rent and therefore providing a justification for overcharging blacks for run-down housing). Ultimately, we noted that the creation of white wealth (the driving goal of the

segregated city) depended on the destruction of black life, the end result of segregation: a spatialized form of eugenics and genocide.

And yet, in part, because *Native Son* understands that the stakes of segregated housing are so high, the novel cannot bring itself to give a completely systemic account of agency. Rather, the novel suggests that those who benefit from and shape the processes of social space (that is, those who use restrictive covenants) can be held accountable because they play an outsized role in creation of social space. Agency is found in this context by understanding the social processes that create social space and using those processes to shape that space for one's own benefit. The figure who, the novel suggests, embodies this role is that of the rentier: Mr. Dalton. At once, a person and an impersonal "force," the novel shows that the invisible hand of the market is a fiction that is instead just that of the rentier who pens social space. I use the word, "pens," deliberately.

For, as much as restrictive covenants were a material form, as a "fine network of contracts," they were simultaneously discursive. And, yet, the fact that restrictive covenants were, in part, discursive did not make their consequences any less material; if anything, as the state came to honor restrictive covenants on the grounds that such contracts were understood to embody the will of private parties rather than that of the state, those consequences became even more pronounced as they became sanctioned by the state.

Given the novel's larger engagement with the world of segregated housing, it would actually seem odd if Wright *did not* think that writing had important material effects; for, the somewhat hidden genocide of blacks in Chicago, the end result of housing segregation (expressed in the novel's naturalism), was made possible, in part, by the discursive nature of restrictive covenants once they had been officially backed by the state with the decision of

Corrigan v Buckley. The imaginary created by a world dominated by restrictive covenants in which the rentier was understood to have agency because of his understanding of and role in shaping social space (in part through writing) thus accounts for the novel's sense that writing is aligned with agency and, more generally, *matters*. Still, this idea is slightly, but importantly, different than the ideological and utopian sentiment that literature has material effects in the world.

The foundation for resolving the tension between the agency of writing and the agency of writing literature, for Wright, was the same foundation that helped him understand the role of restrictive covenants in shaping the city: *Urban Sociology*. We recall that “[i]t was from the scientific findings of men like the late Robert E. Park, Robert Redfield, and Louis Wirth that I drew meanings . . . for my novel, *Native Son*.” *Urban Sociology* helped Wright understand “the meanings of the environment that battered and taunted” him and other blacks in Chicago and provided a “concrete vision of the forces that molded the urban Negro’s body and soul.” In other words, *Urban Sociology* gave Wright an understanding of the “forces” that shaped social space for the benefit of the rentier class. The rentier, we recall, is aligned with agency in the novel, in part, because of this kind of understanding. And, according to the novel, the additional requirement of agency in the novel is that the understanding of how social space is produced must be used to play an outsized role by penning social space or otherwise intervening in society by setting the rules of the game for one’s own benefit. The novel figures the opposite of this kind of engagement in the social world through Bigger whose two deaths, beginning with social death, renders him unable to meaningfully intervene in society: “I’m just black and they make the laws.”

In other words, understanding must be paired with discursive activity (writing “laws” or penning social space through restrictive covenants, which is, as we noted, the writing of a different kind of “law”). The novel itself would seem to embody both understanding and discursive activity and would therefore seem to account for artistic agency. But, to see exactly how the novel figures this agency and the effects of that agency, we would need to examine a form that reflexively stands in for the novel itself.

Thus, to understand that agency and its ostensible effects, we return to the figure with which we began our inquiry: the curtain. While the curtain (and its cognates) most often appears in *Native Son* as a vertically erected boundary in horizontal space, at two different points in the novel, this vertical orientation is replaced by a horizontal orientation. In the first instance, Bigger “s[ees] through a gauzelike curtain of snow” (221). In the second instance, he sees the same image, a “white curtain of falling snow” (164). The curtain here moves down through vertical space before it rests on the ground, covering horizontal space.

In both instances, the novel associates the curtain with written representation. The sentence that ends with “the white curtain of falling snow” is immediately followed with, “He thought of the kidnap note,” and, later in the paragraph, of the “pencil and paper he would use” (164). Likewise, what Bigger sees “through a gauzelike curtain of snow” is “a boy standing under an awning selling papers The papers ought to be full of [Bigger] now. . . . only after he had acted upon feelings which he had had for years would the papers carry the story, his story” (221-222). However, the association of the curtain with written representation is, in a sense, even more basic than the particular examples of ransom notes and newspapers. As the curtain comes to rest over horizontal space as a layer of snow, the whiteness of the curtain

becomes what Michael Fried refers to as “the special blankness of the as yet unwritten page” (100).

The curtain in “horizontally oriented ‘space,’” as Fried notes of other figures in naturalist fiction, gestures to the “scene of writing” (*xiii*). Various features of the curtain get re-coded as elements in the scene of writing. The curtain’s felt quality and its permeability gestures toward the materiality of the page. Above the page, this “white curtain,” we find “a man twirl[ing] a pencil of light over the snow,” writing (259). The man, “twirl[ing] a pencil of light over” the page, inscribes Bigger “within the line” (353). When considered in the context of the “scene of writing,” the author’s “pencil of light” that inscribes Bigger “within the line” draws attention to the line’s function as a boundary in social space at the same time that it draws our attention to “[l]ine[s] of . . . print” and “line[s] of vision” (245, 266).

As the author’s “pencil of light” inscribes Bigger “within the line,” the author becomes a double of the rentier who crafts lines in social space (Bigger “knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the ‘line’”). Too, the primary activity of both the rentier and the author are understood as writing: “lines.” Likewise, both the author and the rentier play an outsized role in shaping their worlds. And, both the rentier and the author are simultaneously embodied (Mr. Dalton and the “man twirl[ing] a pencil of light”) and disembodied (a force that, “like a god,” is more felt than seen). Both, likewise, comprehend social space as a whole, a product and a set of processes. As “[l]ine[s] of . . . print” come to figure as “lines” in social space, we witness a version of the moment at which restrictive covenants are created, which we have noted, is a moment that is usually hidden – we usually see the effects of the restrictive covenants, but not their creation. Thus passive-voice constructions such as: “where it had been decided that black people might live”) (248-49). As the curtain

comes to rest over Chicago, the city becomes a text in which the novel, to use Fredric Jameson's language, "re-writes" social space.⁸⁹ The 'artificial' quality of eugenics, recast in the novel in spatial terms as segregation, here becomes fiction itself.

This utopian re-writing, through its reliance on understanding and discursive activity related to the construction of worlds, is the grounds on which the novel makes claims to artistic agency. The problem of determinism and the agency of black authors, on the one hand, and the problem of restrictive covenants, on the other, are then indistinguishable. This re-writing is, in part, related to the novel's "personalism," which "represents all forms of revolt in writing" (4).

Here, we find one answer why, in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright claims agency while claiming Bigger has none: the latter has little understanding of the processes that craft social space, no pen to re-write social space, and does not play an outsized role in the creation of a world while the former meets all three criteria. This simultaneously utopian and condescending move is more than a cute answer to a complicated relation. Rather, as Wright aligns himself with understanding, writing, and agency, he replaces the alignment of blacks with the body (characteristic of classic naturalism's flirtation with an understanding of blackness as biological inferiority) and 'natural' animalistic impulse (crystallized in the figure of "the brute") with a depiction of himself as aligned with the mind, culture, and self-determination. Whether this is a form of black exceptionalism (as in Wright and Bigger are different) is a complicated question that space does not permit answering here. As a "personalist" writer, Wright is, in part, attempting to write on behalf people in Bigger's position (which, Wright, at one time, was): "personalism represents the revolt of the petty bourgeoisie against the petty bourgeoisie [and] . . . the bourgeoisie" (4). Yet, physical, temporal, and class distance, at the time of the novel's

⁸⁹ For more on re-writing, see the "Introduction" to *Allegory and Ideology*.

writing, had already separated Wright from a character whose backstory at one time mirrored his own.

That said, the move from an understanding of blackness from body to mind, nature to culture, and determinism to self-determination aligns the novel with the larger trend of racial liberalism, despite the novel's suspicions of racial liberalism we have already discussed. Within the more narrow world of racialized housing, a few years later, the alignment of blackness with the mind, culture, and self-authorship was accompanied by a new way to blame blacks for the "decay of housing"; the problem was framed (and in many ways still is framed) as a result of a black culture characterized by "pathology," obscuring the actual source of the "decay": the neglect of properties by landlords who attempt to minimize expenditures and maximize rent. And, in a truly perverse twist of fate, the government would often subsidize the destruction of said properties and the construction of new ones, leading to a new spatial regime of accumulation a few years later: urban renewal. Eventually, urban sociology, too, would devolve into victim blaming, as in Kenneth Clarke's *Dark Ghetto*. Of course, it is too much to blame a novel for these developments; doing so would replicate the mistake of seeing the immaterial as the material. And, yet, the novel's ambivalence about producing sociological knowledge created a very particular "city of feeling" that, unfortunately, continues to inform understandings of the urban landscape today.

At the same time the novel makes place for artistic agency (based on its formal likeness to the agency of the rentier), it is unclear how much this agency is understood to be meaningfully real. Does the novel actually suggest that black authors have agency in an "environment that batter[] and taunt[]" them? Or, is this just part of the novel's utopian imagination? Here, as ever, the novel wants to have it both ways. If we return to the opening scene, we note that the figure of

the curtain is a product of determinism (as it is a direct response to the oppressive housing conditions in which the family live), improvisation (as it involves the creation of a new ‘room’ out of the available materials), and aesthetic form (as a symptomatic representation of the world of racialized housing). The appearance of aesthetic form figured in the curtain, and therefore “personalist naturalism,” is therefore understood to be a product of necessity (determinism) and contingency (an improvised form), and a re-writing of each.

Too, both the account of authorial agency and textual agency, if paired together does create a coherent, if not wholly believable, picture of how Wright might understand the effect his writing has in the world. Authorial agency, in the text, is said to be the result of understanding the social world, discursive activity, and playing an outsized role in the creation of a world. Textual agency is understood to arise when the creation of a picture of the world provokes an affective response, and then prompts action. Taken together, the author might be understood to meaningfully act in the world when authorial agency is paired with textual agency, even if the author is never understood to be an unencumbered free agent. That re-writing is made possible not because the novel attempts to escape the oppressive world of restrictive covenants (though, at times, it feels as though it wants to do just that), but because it re-writes restrictive covenants and

incorporates them into its very form;⁹⁰ the novel figures the re-writing of restrictive covenants and social space through the figure of the curtain and the genre of “personalist naturalism.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ We will return to how this is the case momentarily. Before doing so, it is important to note that this line of thinking is keeping with scholarship on naturalism and a notable departure from it. The relation between writing, contracts, and corporations (like Dalton’s South Side Realty) has long been understood to be a feature of naturalism. In *The Gold Standard and The Logic of Naturalism*, Walter Benn Michaels calls “writing the paradigmatic corporate act” (212). In what is an otherwise bravura chapter on *The Octopus*, Michaels writes, “the deepest complicity between naturalism and the corporation” is their dual interest in writing and writing as contract (213); the writer figure in *The Octopus*, “already putting pen to paper, reproduce[es] with the poet’s hand the turn of the hand that sets the grain rates” (211). Yet, we can see in Michaels’ word choices, “complicity” and “reproducing,” how this argument breaks down. Such thinking arises out of the New Historicist insistence that texts reveal “complicity” with this or that aspect of the social or subvert it. While Michaels likely believes that base determines superstructure, economy and culture are just different kinds of texts for him. There is, in the New Historicist point of view, no theorization of aesthetic form in relation to the social. So, if “writing” is “the paradigmatic corporate act,” then “writing” in a text signals that text’s “complicity” with “the corporation.” In other words, when Michaels sees culture, he cannot help but see it as ideological. Yet, for critics like Jameson, the aesthetic does involve “reproduction,” but that “reproduction” is not understood to be self-evident; it is, rather, taken to be an object of inquiry itself. What this lets us see, that Michaels’ account does not, is that the ideological is simultaneously utopian. It is this double valence that most interests me about *Native Son*. For, it is that double valence that allows Wright to think through, rather than just attempt to find a way out of, the world of restrictive covenants. Such an attempted evasion would only reinstate the primacy of that world. In thinking through the relation of the restrictive covenant, he critiques that relation, while still making room for the utopian on the other side of it and in the aesthetic itself. The language of “complicity” would only serve to flatten this incredibly dynamic relation.

⁹¹ The curtain and “personalist naturalism,” then, ultimately embody and resolve the text’s antinomies. The curtain itself is: a figure for division and permeability; rigid boundaries in social space and those that can be “swept aside” in social practice; that which forecloses and allows for certain type of sociability; the product of determinism and an improvised response; the public and private; a material environment and the felt quality of that environment. Likewise, “personalist naturalism” formally embodies the tension between: objective description of material conditions and subjective representation of how it might feel to live under those conditions; social processes and social practices. Such a world is: composed of, alternatively, a “city of fact” and a “city of feeling”; figured as determined and the result of the interventions of particular actors; composed of “laws” that are also subject to change; understood to be a system and one in which particular bad actors can be held accountable; one in which the ‘artificial’ and the discursive have material consequences. As a result, personalist naturalism is a form that: makes use of naturalism and “personalism,” but reveals the inadequacy of each to the task of the novel and the form of the restrictive covenant; alternatively reads like sociology and sentimental fiction; offers opposing relations of the member to the group (to be one in “twelve million” and to be one of the “twelve million”); understands determinism to have a mood: melancholy; gives into the reader’s desire even as it critiques that same desire; is drawn to the sociological and suspicious of it; undoes type with personhood, but requires the recognition of type to mount a critique; makes room for feeling, experience, and belief in a world that is seemingly determined by material structures; seeks to be a form of social pedagogy while demystifying the world as a set of material relations; relies on a kind of paternalism even as it seeks self-determination; is just as likely to offer an account of the world in the language of pragmatism as Marxism; critiques production and consumption; sees artistic legitimacy and determinism as compatible; hopes to instrumentalize itself and to function as a form of self-mythologization; places itself in a generic tradition and departs from it; sees “force” as simultaneously a figure for persons, affects, and processes of accumulation. Whether we are speaking of “personalist naturalism” or the figure that symbolizes it in the novel, the curtain, the antinomies that the novel embodies are resolved by that form, each part of the antinomy organically related to the other in a larger whole, just as each side of the kitchenette (rooms within a room) are a part of the same “rat-infested room” (164). What keeps the novel from being a set of empty paradoxes is the fact that that these antinomies arise out of the novel’s material world

EUGENICS AND HYBRID FORMS

The novel's intense ambivalence and its oftentimes tortured logic are resolved in a markedly hybrid form: "personalist naturalism." Yet, that hybridity is an offshoot of other hybrids. "Personalism," Wright lets us know, "will use all [literary] techniques, or part or whole of techniques" (4). The form thus draws from melodrama in its emphasis on emotion ("there is one thing it has in abundance – emotional consciousness, intense emotional consciousness") (2), sentimental literature in its history as a form of "protest" ("it will seek to make those come in contact with it take sides for or against certain moral issues") (3-4), realism in its focus on the individual (it "should have as its main burden and theme of posing the problem of the individual") (1), and modernism in its self-importance and its emphasis on mediation ("Beauty will consist in the power of a given work to influence. The greatest novel will be that one which turns the world upside down") (4). The hybrid 'genre' of "personalism" thus merges with naturalism and creates out of that relation a new form. Given naturalism's well-documented interest in eugenics, the novel's "personalism" challenges naturalism's 'association' with racial 'purity.'

Personalist naturalism, we might say, is "impure" on purpose; and, in its impurity, "personalist naturalism" helps us see that naturalism itself was always hybrid. For example, Herbert Spencer's (one of the founding figures of naturalism in philosophy) most important text that included works on biology, sociology, psychology, and ethics was called the *Synthetic Philosophy*. Synthetic Philosophy can here be contrasted with Analytic Philosophy. To appreciate the difference between the two, consider the difference between analytic sentences and synthetic sentences. Analytic sentences "are those whose truth can be *known* merely by knowing the meanings of the constituent terms, as opposed to having also to know something

about the represented world” i.e.: “Ophthalmologists are doctors” (“The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction”).⁹² There is a logically necessary relation between the words “doctors” and “ophthalmologists.” Synthetic sentences, by contrast, “are those whose truth can [only] be *known* . . . by knowing . . . something about the represented world” i.e. “Ophthalmologists are rich” (“The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction). Unlike the analytic sentence, “Ophthalmologists are doctors,” there is no logically necessary relation between “Ophthalmologists” and being “rich.” Both parts of the sentence are contingent: being an “Ophthalmologist” does not automatically guarantee being “rich” and being “rich” does not mean one is an “Ophthalmologist.”

Synthetic philosophies of all kinds, including Spencer’s, then, depend upon information about the world in order to make their claims. The missing information about the world in this sentence is, coincidentally, material conditions, what we call History. To read this information back into the sentence is to integrate word with world. Synthetic philosophies like Spencer’s, including most forms of naturalist thought, is characterized by this integrative quality, bridging as it does one discipline with another (biology with sociology, for example), language with matter, fact with fiction.

As the novel’s form is characterized by this sort of integrative quality and is a hybrid form, to use the biological metaphor, birthed of two hybrid forms, “personalist naturalism” formally functions an affront to any notion of ‘purity,’ whether figured in racial or spatial terms, which are, in the novel, two ways of saying the same thing, given the novel’s sense that segregation is just a spatialized form of eugenics. We recall that the curtain’s (which figures “personalist naturalism” in the novel) vertical orientation is replaced with a horizontal orientation when the curtain comes to figure the falling snow. As it does so, its function as a boundary or

⁹² For more on the Synthetic/Analytic distinction, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analytic-synthetic/>.

limit becomes limitless as that mechanism of division falls with it. No doubt, this moment shows that “personalist naturalism” embodies a kind of hope for integration with teeth: “[t]here’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor . . . [a]fter the revolution.”

But, the curtain becoming the falling snow is also reflexive as the reader is confronted with the materiality of the page in the place of the segregated world of racialized housing. In place of the white rentier, we see the black author. This moment is then a re-writing and inversion of the scene with which we began: as Bigger watches *Trader Horn*, “the African scene” fades as it is “replaced by images . . . of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking and dancing”: a white authored vision of blackness produced by white wealth. In this re-writing, Wright makes claims to agency previously held only by the rentier. The work of writing and the work of the rentier here start to look markedly similar. As we see the whiteness of the curtain cover the city, we see the page and Wright creating his masterwork upon it.⁹³ And, as we do, we can see Wright wanting so badly to wipe the slate of the city clean as easily as he could pull out a new page and start from scratch.

A FINAL ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE

In the end, “personalist naturalism,” at its most utopian and ideological, attempts to do just this: it “will use all [literary] techniques, or part or whole of techniques . . . to influence,” to “turn[] the world upside down.” Yet, in an attempt to “turn the world of upside down,” the novel, finally, will end up negating the complex solutions that it worked so hard to reach. We see this negation begin as the work of writing starts to merge with the act of penning social space while social agency starts to merge with authorial agency and textual agency. As a result, these terms get incredibly confused. With that confusion comes the invitation to think one more time about

⁹³ For another reading of Wright and the novel’s reflexivity, see Szalay’s *New Deal Modernism* 255.

the possibilities of black authorship in the novel. Consider the novel's closing scene in this light.

At the end of the novel, Max speaks with Bigger in his cell after the latter is condemned to die.

Max looks out the window with Bigger, asking him,

See all those buildings, Bigger? . . . You lived in one of them once . . . They're made out of steel and stone. But the steel and stone don't hold 'em together. You know what holds those buildings up, Bigger? You what keeps them in their place, keeps them from tumbling down? . . . It's the belief of men. If men stopped believing, stopped having faith, they'd come tumbling down. Those buildings sprang up out of the hearts of men, Bigger. Men like you. Men kept hungry, kept needing, and those buildings kept growing and unfolding. You once told me that you wanted to do a lot of things. Well, that's *the feeling* that keeps those buildings in their places. . . . The men who own those buildings are afraid. They want to keep what they own, even if it makes others suffer. In order to keep it, they push men down in the mud and tell them they are beasts. (426-27, emphasis added)

In Max's summation, the novel's determinism (registered by words like "hungry," "needing," "suffer," and phrases like, "they push men down in the mud") and thereby the novel's naturalism (also found in the language of "beasts" and the passage's emphasis on ownership) is paired with its desire to describe how it feels to live in such a world (to be made to "suffer," to be "push[ed] down in the mud"). The passage, too, speaks to the novel's general tendency to express the objective in subjective terms. Here, though, that tendency is taken to its extreme: it is "belief" and "*feeling* that keeps those buildings in their places" even as those same buildings are responsible for the wealth of the owners.

The confusion of the material with the immaterial can be understood to arise from the novel's "personalism," which we noted, is a form of "functionalism." We recall, "Personalism will be dynamic, functional . . . Its expression will become an objective act, having immediacy as its aim. . . . the act of expression must become an objective act, having implications and consequences in the social sphere. . . . Beauty will consist in the power of a given work to influence. The greatest novel will be that one which turns the world upside down" (4). Wright's

essay, here, redefines environment as word and world blend together: environments are texts. The novel's social determinism, here, threatens to become a form of determinism arising from ideological sources: texts.

The corollary to this is that shaping mediation means shaping the environment and therefore the outcomes that occur as a result of the construction of the environment. But, just what, specifically, would that look like? In this context, the author places before the reader a sentimental image of the rentier "push[ing] men down in the mud." Such an image, as we have seen in the novel, is understood to provoke an emotional response and lead to action ("to do something"). Given the novel's framing of the perpetrator of this act to be the rentier, its interest in holding the rentier accountable, and its virtual sociology lesson on the ways in which restrictive covenants have been used as a form of state-backed genocide (and created white wealth on the backs of black poverty and death), we might reasonably conclude that the novel anticipates some change related to this issue. At the same time, as the immaterial and the material get confused, the novel places ownership and belief in the rightness of ownership (that is, belief in private property) on the same plane. As it does so, the novel's pedagogical bent attempts to change the reader's beliefs, and, in so doing, in a sentiment that is utopian as it is ideological, change the construction of the world, to re-write a world and replace it, to overturn ownership with the flick of the pen, or, perhaps, just to turn one's back on the world of matter to embrace a world of texts.

Naturalism Without a Cause, or, Method Acting, Autonomy, and the Curious “as if” of the

Postwar Subject in Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause*

You are in control. You are never out of control. You’re the master. You own the thing.
Stella Adler, *The Art of Acting*

You’ve imagined it. Therefore it exists.
Stella Adler, *The Art of Acting*

It is only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature is unable to bring to life again.
William James, “The Will to Believe”

RECAP

In the last two chapters, we have attended to the centrality of art to literary naturalism, paying special attention to the status of art and art-making as each relates to questions about necessity and determinism. So far, we have seen two different versions in which literary naturalists have framed this issue.

We saw Dreiser whole-heartedly embrace necessity and determinism in the name of the evolution of a system as a whole: “We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail” (Dreiser 73). The aesthetic, in *Sister Carrie*, became the space in which subjugation become subjectification as type returned to itself such that it could be ‘transcended’: “You and I are but mediums, through which something is expressing itself. Now, our duty is to make ourselves ready mediums. . . . You must help the world express itself” (485). We noted that this account comes dangerously close to justifying subjugation; or, perhaps, this account just does justify subjugation.

For Wright, on the other hand, determinism, necessity, and the discourse of type were not realities to be embraced, but problems to be solved. Wright, for example, could not simply embrace the discourse of type as he understood it to be a racialized discourse connected to state-backed violence, whether that violence was expressed through the criminal justice system or

through housing policies. In *Native Son*, the relation between determinism and art-making was even more pressing for Wright as the discourse of type (characteristic of literary naturalism and the organicist thought on which it relies) had already aligned blacks with the body (most forcefully, in “the brute” archetype), leaving little room for work of the mind. Wright was then further forced to think through the complicated relation between blackness and naturalism, all the while considering his own legacy as a writer. Yet, as we noted, Wright was attracted to naturalism (and urban sociology) as a means of representing the world and the social processes that make up that world (like restrictive covenants) in objective concrete terms.

While Wright turned to literary naturalism because of the affordances of naturalism, he did not embrace the form *in toto*, as doing so would have meant glossing over a number of problems, in part, related to race and authorship. Thus, Wright modified naturalism as he re-purposed it (moving from an account of determinism rooted in biological *and* social processes to *just* social processes) and complemented the novel’s naturalism with a “personalist aesthetic.” As a result, Wright came up with resolutions to a number of questions regarding agency/determination, contingency/necessity, physical science/social science, literature/sociology, art/history, and fact/feeling. The key to this resolution, as we noted, was the social imaginary created by restrictive covenants.

In the process, Wright de-formed classic naturalism to such a degree that its key terms were both defamiliarized and, in some cases, replaced. In our reading of *Native Son*, we saw Wright insist that there need be no contradiction between blackness and naturalism, between an emphasis on objective systems and individuals, between a focus on material conditions and experience and affect, between an understanding of the world as the product of necessity and the world as the product of contingency. Over the course of the chapter, we saw impersonal forces

get redefined as persons, sociology as psychology, demystification as pedagogy, ideas as material things, material environments as immaterial ones (the product of texts, feelings, and beliefs), and finally, a world of matter as a world of texts.

We ended the chapter by unpacking two different ways the novel resolves the problem of writing and determinism. In the first version, we saw that:

Authorial agency, in the text, is said to be the result of understanding the social world, discursive activity, and playing an outsized role in the creation of a world. Textual agency is understood to arise when the creation of a picture of the world provokes an affective response, and then prompts action. Taken together, the author might be understood to meaningfully act in the world when authorial agency is paired with textual agency, even if the author is never understood to be an unencumbered free agent. (72)

In the second version, we saw that “The novel’s social determinism . . . threatens to become a form of determinism arising from ideological sources: texts” (and other media) and “beliefs”: “shaping mediation[, here,] means shaping the environment and therefore the outcomes that occur as a result of the construction of the environment” (78). While these two resolutions suggest that determinism arises from different sources, one material and one ideological, they both share a focus on individuals, affects, and experiences. Further, both resolutions implicitly suggest that shaping mediation means shaping persons. Perhaps, we might be inclined to believe that if this is determinism, it is a determinism unworthy of the name. Fair enough.

In any case, what is clear is that Wright’s attempt to solve the problem of artistic creation and determinism not only involved reinterpreting determinism (in the second version above), but (in both versions) also brought to the fore an additional problem: that of the relation between reading and textual agency, specifically, that the act of reading (or just existing in culture) means that our ideas, feelings, and actions are not our own, what we call the problem of interpellation. Whether shaping persons by shaping mediation is for a good cause (i.e. to create housing justice

activists) is likely of little relief to the person being shaped by that mediation. We will return to this problem throughout.

DETERMINISM, PRAGMATISM, AND LATE NATURALISM

For now, it is important to note that while we largely examined these issues and Wright's resolution of them through the lens of form, we did note some of the schools of thought Wright pulled from in his de-formation of classic naturalism, starting with urban sociology before moving into racial liberalism and, most importantly for our purposes here, pragmatism. In his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, Wright cited both William James and John Dewey (xxiii, xxxii). We saw *Native Son* dabble in pragmatism, for example, in the novel's consequentialism, organicism, ambivalence, characterization of paradox, redefinition of beauty ("Beauty will consist in the power of a given work to influence"), rejection of ideological and formal purity, skepticism towards totalizing accounts of the social, exploration of contingency, insistence on the uniqueness of the individual (to be the one in "twelve million"), and emphasis on experience and belief (4).

On the one hand, this connection should be unsurprising to us given that scholars like Walter Benn Michaels, James Livingston, Ross Posnock, and Jennifer Fleissner have long noted association between naturalism and pragmatism; on the other hand, this connection is somewhat odd as classic naturalism's systemic, materialist accounts of agency (i.e. hard determinism, necessity, and the idea of "ultimate causes") are incompatible with pragmatism's "free-will determinism" (which may be no determinism at all), its skepticism towards totalizing accounts of knowledge and the social, and its belief in "proximate causes" (James 323). In short, the accounts of agency offered by classic naturalism and pragmatism appear to be at odds, specifically, in their accounts of how determined they understand the world to be. Thus, for

example, Fleissner attempts to resolve the tension between naturalism and pragmatism by reinterpreting naturalist determinism as “compulsion,” which, among other things, leaves room for a William James style “free-will determinism” (149). I do not intend to argue with this reading. Rather, I merely intend to point out the fact that, for Fleissner to reconcile classic naturalism with pragmatism, she must (or perhaps just feels compelled to) question the longstanding understanding that classic naturalist novels share an underlying belief in one form of determinism or another. But, contemporary critics are not the first to question the centrality of determinism to naturalism, at least at a certain stage of its development.

Ten years after the publication of *Native Son*, late naturalist novelist, James T. Farrell, similarly bristled against characterizations of literary naturalism as necessarily deterministic. Farrell opens the essay by publicly castigating a professor who (at least according to Farrell) wrote an article that essentially suggested: “ $F + D = N$ F equals fiction, D equals determinism, and N equals naturalism. Fiction plus determinism equals naturalism” (247). In response, Farrell asks, “Just what has the problem of free will versus determinism to do with literature?” (254); “How will the assumption that man has free will make someone a better writer?” (255); and, “what insight do we gain by linking [individual novels we call naturalistic] together in terms of a watered-down generalization?” (261). In the end, he says, “the only real answer is to be found in the consequences” (264).

Farrell’s response is interesting for a few reasons. First, he finds the professor’s characterization of naturalism to be reductive (i.e. it does not pay sufficient attention to the distinctiveness of each novel). Second, he bases his criticism of the professor’s equation on its relevance (i.e. one is using irrelevant terms or those that do not fit the situation one is evaluating) for evaluating literature (“Just what has the problem of free will versus determinism to do with

literature?”), its reliance on categorization (“watered-down generalization”), and the perceived disconnect between a writer’s belief (or lack of belief) in determinism has on the construction of a novel (“How will the assumption that man has free will make someone a better writer? . . . the only real answer is to be found in the consequences”). Farrell further critiques the professor for the way in which he supposedly (we do not know, he does not quote him) asks questions about free will: “It is important here to observe that those who pose this question, pose it in terms of a flat either/or. Is man free or is he not free? Does man have free will, or is he completely determined?” (255). The professor, here, is figured as something of a simpleton as he cannot appreciate complexity and paradox.

Each of Farrell’s critiques (lack of relevance, over-generalizing and being reductive, lack of attention to consequences of belief, inattention to complexity and paradox) of the unnamed professor are critiques that emerge from pragmatist thought and continue into pragmatist literary criticism. But, Farrell’s reliance on pragmatist thought is even more obvious than that as he quotes George Herbert Mead, William James, and John Dewey throughout. We see the influence of pragmatist thought, likewise, when Farrell lets us know, “I write novels in order to try to reveal what life seems to me to be like. I write novels as part of an attempt to explore the nature of experience” (258). These statements beg the questions, “what does life seem to be like to Farrell?” and “what is the role of experience in naturalism by the time of Farrell’s writing?” To answer these questions, it helps to pay attention to how Farrell positions himself and his argument in this essay. Farrell, we learn, accepts the naturalist label, but separates himself from some of the earlier naturalists like Zola; Farrell is not a “monistic determinist” like earlier, as he would have us believe, less sophisticated naturalists (255). Zola, Farrell suggests, ended up unreflectively adopting “the developing mental climate of his own times” (252). In other words,

like Wright, Farrell sees environment (and constraints on free will) as, at least in part, ideological (“mental climate”). And, like Wright, Farrell suggests that this environment influences the writer and reader (“those we might influence” through novels) (252). Farrell goes on to say that his own conception of the question of free will and determinism is similar to the account provided in “The Dilemma of Determinism” by William James; free-will, in this account, is “an achievement” rather than “an inherent attribute of man” (255). To be clear, in “The Dilemma of Determinism,” James does not attempt to disprove determinism (in a logical or empirical sense) so much as suggest, through an appeal to consequences, that a belief in hard determinism would be morally unpalatable.

One way to answer the aforementioned questions (“what does life . . . seem to be like to Farrell?” and “what is the role of experience in naturalism by the time of Farrell’s writing?”) is that Farrell, and late naturalists more broadly (including, as we will see, Nicholas Ray): (1), zero in on the *experience* and *perception* of free will and determinism rather than its objective existence; (2), focus on constraints on free will that emerge from ideological sources (texts, media, psychology); (3), like classic naturalists, continue to question the possibility of unencumbered agency and what we often call the liberal humanist model of personhood (their accounts share much more in common with a pragmatist subject-in-process); and (4), like pragmatists, question hard determinisms. Given that Farrell protests far too much when the unnamed professor equates the former’s work with determinism, we might also conclude that the answer to, “what does life seem to be like to Farrell and late naturalists?,” may very well just be that one’s life might seem to be determined even when one finds the consequences of that notion to be unpalatable.

DETERMINISM, PRAGMATISM, AND THE NATURALIST MODE

I begin this chapter with an exploration of pragmatism, naturalism, and changing conceptions of determinism not only to connect this chapter to the previous ones, but also to make three observations that we will return to throughout the chapter. First, unlike classic naturalist novels, in which the relation between pragmatism and naturalism could only ever be, at best, strained, and, at worst, incompatible (given the genre's investment in determinism), in late naturalism, pragmatism and naturalism are not only compatible, but almost indistinguishable. Second, writers of literary naturalism cannot help but take on the weight of their genre's history every time they write in that genre. As the problem of determinism is central to the history of naturalism, despite Farrell's protestations to the contrary, writing entails taking on the burden of that problem.

Which leads to my third point: following Richard Lehan, I understand naturalism to not only be a genre, but a mode (68). Throughout this dissertation, I have shown the centrality of the discourses of philosophy, physical science, and social sciences to literary naturalism. Further, in naturalism's integrative (aka synthetic) quality, we have seen that it involves bridging one discipline with another, and word with world. Naturalist authors, as we have seen, borrow explicitly and liberally from those disciplines to create their worlds, worlds that foreground constraints on human agency. While the discourses of the physical sciences formed the basis of classic naturalism, those discourses were replaced by the discourses of the social sciences in later versions of naturalism (as in Wright and Farrell). Yet, what remained consistent throughout this transition was naturalism's integrative or synthetic quality and its implicit (and sometimes explicit) insistence that the problem of determinism continues to be of central importance for literature, whether we are examining the relation between subject/verb, setting/character, or

literature/history. Naturalism, as a mode, is then a privileged site for thinking through questions about agency⁹⁴ in literature and how those questions intersect with various discourses (those of philosophy, physical science, and, especially, social science). We might, likewise, run this argument backward to suggest that questions about agency in literature (at least after the birth of naturalism, proper) are questions about naturalism; as a mode, then, naturalism extends beyond the confines of the genre itself.

REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE, ITS PREDECESSORS, AND THE REDEFINITION OF DETERMINISM

It is in this sense that I will be reading Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) as a text in the naturalist mode. *Rebel Without a Cause* is, of course, one of the paradigmatic examples of Hollywood melodrama. But, it also shares a number of features of its naturalist predecessors. Ray's film will, like *Sister Carrie*, make much of youth and type, focus on moments of self-reflexivity, continuously foreground the connection between theatre and everyday life, and often go out of its way to reverse the realist relation of character and world (Livingston 138). While we ended our chapter on *Sister Carrie* with the birth of the "naturalist actor," here, we begin with that same figure as we focus our attention on Method actors, a subspecies of naturalist actors. Today, the terms "naturalist acting" (in the proper and colloquial sense) and "Method acting" are often indistinguishable. Similarly, both *Native Son* and *Rebel Without a Cause* share an interest in 'juvenile delinquency' (and youth subcultures in general) and criminality, an engagement with the idea of type, and an affinity for the discourses of the academy (in the case of the latter, those of psychology, drama, and sociology in the pragmatist

⁹⁴ Here, I am specifically referring to questions about agency understood to arise from natural and socio-historical (or at least socio-cultural) sources. Tragedy, for example, involves questions of determinism, but frames those questions under the rubric of timeless myth.

tradition, specifically, symbolic interactionism) and that of pragmatism (its rejection of ideological and formal purity, skepticism towards totalizing accounts of the social, interest in pragmatist sociology – symbolic interactionism, in the case of *Rebel*, and an emphasis on experience and belief). Most substantively, *Rebel Without a Cause* and, at times, *Native Son*, share an understanding that shaping environments and shaping mediation means shaping persons; that is, both texts entertain and, in the case of *Rebel*, rely on mediatic, ideological, and behaviorist models of determinism. As both texts share a belief in one form of determinism or another, they also express their assent to that belief with a sense of mourning and, at times, rage. We will unpack exactly how these ideas play out in the film throughout this chapter.

Before doing so, though, it is worth noting that each of the features *Rebel Without a Cause* shares with its naturalist predecessors (most clearly, in the late naturalism of someone like Farrell) get articulated in the text to which the title of the film is an allusion: Robert M. Lindner's case study that attempts to explain a phenomenon that bridges the sociological and the psychological "the criminal psychopath": *Rebel Without a Cause: The Story of a Criminal Psychopath*. Like others before him, Lindner borrows extensively from the language of naturalism: "a composite 'type'" (ix), "the species" (1), "heredity" (8), "environment" (8), "forces" (13), "predatory creature," etc. (13). He alludes to naturalism's tendency towards eugenics and genocide: "cleansing civilization of the predatory creature" (13). Lindner speaks extensively of the tendency towards categorization in the physical and social sciences: the "mechanics of sorting," "categories, rubrics, classification" (1). This tendency results in "the species [being] dissected and labelled, named and branded, tagged and stamped" (1). This commentary on and implicit critique of this tendency is itself an indication that Lindner's text comes at late stage in the development of a naturalist understanding of the world. To Lindner,

this tendency arises from the scientist's desire "to lend order to the chaos about him" (1). While Lindner is skeptical of such categorization, he nevertheless finds such categories to be useful; in other words, such categories have a pragmatic value. And, while Lindner is discussing criminality, he does so, not under the rubric of sociology (or, formerly, biology), but of a 'newer' science, psychology: "a type of personality disorder . . . is responsible for much of crime" (xi). Likewise, the concrete forces that make up the social (the social processes inherent in capitalism at a given stage of development) have been replaced by the more abstract idea of a "social milieu" (13). What such sociological explanations of criminality leave out, according to Lindner, is the "subtle and deep-stirring interplay of *emotion* and *experience* involved in generating antisocial attitude and behaviour" [*sic*] (emphasis added) (x). At bottom, then, Lindner finds crime (which, for him, *just is* criminal behavior) to be the result of "emotion" and "experience," that, together, form the personality of the "criminal psychopath." Yet, Lindner notes that this personality (and therefore its expression) "is a being constantly modified" by "experience," "emotion," and "social milieu" (8). As such, Lindner concludes that if it were possible to shape some combination of the "criminal psychopath's" "experience," "emotion," and "social milieu," it would be possible "to make [the 'criminal psychopath' into] a good citizen" (13). The rest of the text finds Lindner using his psychoanalytic sessions with his patient, Harold, to hypnotize the latter in order to "get[] below the surface of much puzzling criminalistic behaviour" [*sic*] and "create a permanent reconstruction of the personality" (x). While Lindner suggests that this process is for what he perceives to be a good cause ("to make [the 'criminal psychopath' into] a good citizen"), that process nevertheless returns us to the problem of autonomy. It is this problem that Ray's film inherits from its namesake and its naturalist predecessors. Ray's film

roots its understanding of determinism in Method acting: a sort of hodgepodge of Freudianism,⁹⁵ Pavlovian and Skinnerian behaviorism,⁹⁶ the discourses of 1950s consensus culture,⁹⁷ and pragmatism (in its soft determinism and emphasis on belief and perception). Consequently, Method acting (and its somewhat “soft determinism”) becomes synonymous with late naturalism in this chapter. While we may very well take this form of determinism not to be worthy of the name, perhaps this is because late naturalism is just naturalism “without a cause.”

METHOD ACTING AND CONSENSUS CULTURE

Rebel Without a Cause opens on Jim Stark (James Dean) drunkenly stumbling to the ground, hoping to get a closer look at a wind-up toy monkey he finds in the middle of a deserted street. As the title credits begin, Jim winds up the toy to watch it clang cymbals together before laying the toy down and, as if to tuck the toy monkey into bed, covering it with a piece of littered scrap paper and lying beside it in the fetal position.



Figure 8. “Opening” of Nicholas Ray’s 1955 *Rebel Without a Cause*

⁹⁵ For more on Freudianism and the Method, see Trask 119-48.

⁹⁶ For more on Behaviorism and the Method, see Trask 119-48.

⁹⁷ For more on this, see pages 12-17.

According to cast members and Ray, Dean improvised much of this opening (Rathgeb 138–39). As Steve Vineberg has noted, improvisation and object manipulation are marks of Method acting (6–7). Such improvisation, Virginia Wexman suggests, creates the sense that the actor “often appears to be competing with a text” (174). We might further add that the actor also simultaneously exists within the text (the film) and is inhabited by that text (similar to the process of interpellation). The text against which the actor “compet[es]” is then, the actor’s environment. If we apply this idea to its cultural context, we might conclude that, by “competing with a text,” the 1950s Method actor was rebelling against the text and attempting to gain a sense of individuality in what Irving Howe famously called the “age of conformity.” There is some debate about the degree to which James Dean fits the mold of a Method actor. Even so, Murray Pomerance has shown that the titular rebel, Jim Stark, who longs for and to a certain degree employs “a style of performance in which very little is hidden, an ‘authentic’ performance,” nevertheless comes to stand in for the figure of the 1950s Method Actor (45). Through what James Naremore calls “metaperformances” (moments in which James Dean performs the role of Jim Stark as Jim Stark performs various roles in front of his peers), *Rebel Without a Cause* serves as a commentary on and critique of the rise of Method acting alongside, and, perhaps, in opposition to consensus culture.

The discourses arising out of 1950s consensus culture, like its naturalist precursors, contested the liberal humanist “model of personhood—a view of the individual as a rational, motivated agent with a projected core of beliefs, desires, and memories” (Melley 14). Yet, the discourses of consensus culture suggested that this “model of personhood” was challenged not by material sources, but immaterial ones. For example, this view of personhood was challenged in the period’s simultaneous valorization and fear of conformity. As Alan Nadel has shown,

“‘conformity’ became a positive value in and of itself,” most notably because it ensured that citizens were acquiescing to a set of given social and political norms privileged in “containment culture” (4). At the same time, fear of conformity was prevalent. In one of the period’s most important sociological studies, *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman’s concern with the “other-direction” characteristic of postwar life reflected a larger concern about a perceived loss of individuality and uniqueness of personal identity (19–25). Also writing about personal identity during the same period, Erving Goffman, a sociologist in the pragmatist tradition of symbolic interactionism, echoes Melley when he concludes: “a correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it” (252). For Goffman, social interaction was real-life reader response in which the self was not the author but a particular interpretation of a text: one’s performance. Thus, even sociological explanations replaced material accounts with immaterial ones. Writing about formulations of self-hood in the postwar academy, Michael Trask asserts, “none of [the aforementioned] sociologists took the view that the self existed somewhere apart from its roles” (126). Thus, for Riesman and Goffman, Trask writes, “there was nothing to be found in even the deepest excavation of the self’s interior. The social performance went all the way down” (127).⁹⁸

In perhaps the most damning critique of the period, *The Hidden Persuaders*, journalist Vance Packard suggested that glorified ad men, whom he called “depth boys,” were successfully using “insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences” to create a society of consumer subjects by “molding and adjusting [our] attitudes” for their purposes and “‘engineering’ our

⁹⁸ Trask pits postwar sociologists and Method teachers against one another for the sake of historicizing the range of performance-based identities advanced by the postwar academy beyond the standard performance/authenticity binary.

consent to their propositions” (3-4). Because “these efforts” appealed to instincts and desires “beneath our level of awareness,” Packard suggested, “many of us are being influenced and manipulated, far more than we realize, in the patterns of our everyday lives” (3). In short, citizens no longer (if they had ever) thought for themselves, but thought what the “depth boys” wanted them to think. Packard is, interestingly, less concerned with what the rise of advertising culture means for the construction of the American economy (and who benefits from this construction) than what this means for the individual. Packard’s sense that “insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences” are being marshalled to craft a society of consumer subjects is just Lindner’s idea carried out on a large scale: that such efforts can create a “permanent reconstruction of the personality.” As Packard described this system of “hidden persuasion,” he was not only questioning the ownership of one’s thoughts but the source of one’s actions and thereby the viability of human agency itself. Oddly, Packard concludes his text with the same liberal humanist assumptions with which he began: “We still have a strong defense available against such persuaders: we can choose not to be persuaded” (205). Such writings simultaneously mourned the end of the liberal humanist subject and reasserted it based on nothing more than willful ignorance. This “nervous acknowledgement, and rejection, of postmodern subjectivity” (15), Timothy Melley asserts, is characteristic of what he calls “agency panic”: an “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control— the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been constructed by powerful external agents” (12).

In this chapter, I show that Method acting of the 1950s took into consideration the concerns that arose due to “agency panic” and reformulated those concerns in an account of the postwar subject. The rise of the Method can be understood as symptomatic of the sense of

perceived loss (of agency, personal identity, and human uniqueness) occasioned not just by consensus culture, but the increasingly prominent role that naturalistic discourse (“insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences”) played in shaping popular understandings of human agency. Packard’s incredibly popular *Hidden Persuaders*, for example, is a work of journalism, not a text published by an academic press. Other examples of how popular such concepts became can be found in films like *Invasion of The Body Snatchers* and *The Manchurian Candidate*. In light of the challenges to human agency posed by naturalistic discourse and popularized across various media, the Method reformulated an account of subjectivity in which identity and agency are not intrinsic to subjectivity, but rather illusory heuristics to be sincerely treated “as if” they were real. The Method, unlike Farrell’s simpleton professor, avoids the mistake of posing and answering the question of determinism in binary terms: “It is important here to observe that those who pose this question, pose it in terms of a flat either/or. Is man free or is he not free? Does man have free will, or is he completely determined?” Instead, like Farrell and late naturalism more broadly, The Method focuses less on the objective existence of free-will or determinism than the perception of them, and frames the discussion of determinism through ideological, mediatic, and behavioristic models. In my account of the film, the Method becomes more than an approach to acting; it functions as a mode of being and understanding the world, creating a space for the postwar subject to cultivate the perception of autonomy and a coherent personal identity, while acknowledging its limits. While others, like Michael Trask, have examined Method subjectivity, such accounts underestimate how difficult it would be to translate the theory of the Method into “everyday life.” And, it is here, in the gap between theory and “everyday life,” between the written word and the shifting power dynamics of social performance, that *Rebel Without a Cause* reveals Method subjectivity at its most precarious. Yet,

it is precisely because the attempt to hold on to perception of agency is so precarious (and its consequences so disastrous) that the film ultimately ends up reaffirming the necessity of determinism (and its desire to find a “cause” for everything) as a way of understanding the world.

THE THEORY OF THE METHOD

The rhetoric of Lee Strasberg, one of the founders of the American Method, would have us believe that the concept of “affective memory” and, by extension, the Method more broadly, can be understood as an emancipatory project. When tasked with conveying a particular emotion, Strasberg suggests, the Method actor can use affective memory as she creates an “emotional reality” by substituting the specifics of the scene with the memory of “a past event with the strength of emotional response that is pertinent to the monologue or scene . . . , which is a parallel reality” (29). Accordingly, the actor’s performance, drawing on past experience, fundamentally changes her experience of the present, creating an emotional response in herself regardless of her environment. The facticity of one’s environment, here, gives way to one’s perception of it, the material world replaced by the life of the mind. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Strasberg describes this process as “magical”; the actor who uses “affective memory” can “re-live” (31) and “re-experience the sensations” of the original event (17). Whether couched in the rhetoric of mysticism or not, “affective memory” is directly tied to perceived agency, which is to say that “affective memory” can be applied to not only the stage, but real world situations. Even in the context of consensus culture, the actor who employs affective memory “is shaping, utilizing, and commenting not just on the emotional memory, but adding [her] own reaction to it in the present moment” (Strasberg 28). The Method actor who cannot control external situations (including various forms of inequality and oppression) can thus change the way she experiences

those situations. While the emancipatory potential of “affective memory” is limited as it does not extend beyond personal consciousness, it is intended to grant individuals some measure of refuge when it may be otherwise unavailable.

In addition to creating the perception of agency, “affective memory and “personalization” ostensibly offered Method practitioners a more stable sense of personal identity than that found in consensus culture.⁹⁹ On the notion of “personalization,” the founder of “the system” (the Soviet precursor to the Method), Konstantin Stanislavski told his students, “Always and forever, when you are on the stage, you must play yourself” (167). Stanislavski’s statement, here, can be contrasted with the goal of classical acting, and melodramatic type acting, in particular, that we discussed in chapter one; actors in the classical acting and melodramatic type acting traditions attempt to rid their performance of any trace of their own personality. We noted, for example, that “the [melodramatic type] actor was encouraged to shed individual traits and to acquire a standard, but aestheticized, gestural vocabulary imagined to be close to” a “universal gestural vocabulary” (Mayer and Day-Mayer 105); such “actors tended towards stereotypical representation rather than individualized characterization. They had been specifically employed to embody the ‘stock characters’ of the company” (Mayer and Day-Mayer 113). The Method, by contrast, attempts to coalesce these disparate roles into a single “stable” referent, the actor. No longer a mere vehicle in service to the author (or their text), the actor, by filtering her roles through life experience, becomes a foundational creator of a text, which Trask notes is an inversion of Goffman’s formulation of the self (that the “self . . . is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it” [252]). Contra Goffman, “The goal of the Method,” as Trask

⁹⁹ I follow Trask in describing Method actors as “practitioners”; this language has the benefit of describing followers of the Method in a way that is not restricted to the stage. Such language thus extends to real life.

has shown, “was to revive in its practitioners an awareness of their own coherence across time,” specifically through “emotion memory” (130). In continuance, Trask writes, “while [Stanislavski’s American] successors were divided over the term’s interpretation, they agreed that both emotions and memory were sacrosanct” (130). Sacrosanct or not, the Method effectively internalized the performance of them. In this, performance was not so much an external phenomenon (the audience’s interpretation) as an internal state (the performer’s perception of it). For the Method’s turn to “the inner truth of performance,” Trask argues, was “a revolt against entrapment by the audience” (130). While the postwar sociologists, echoing the model of classical acting, located the self outside, the Method located it, once again, on the “inside.” For the Method actor, Trask writes, “the inner truth of a performance matters more . . . than any audience attending to it” (Trask 130).

The Method similarly used “if” statements to cultivate the practitioner’s sense of control of their identity and actions. The Method, in moving beyond the limits of external realities, circumvented “the all- or-nothing choice between truth and falsity” by focusing on “the ‘honesty’ of suppositions” (Trask 132). Trask writes that, for Stanislavski, “the ‘honesty’ of suppositions” is denoted by the word, “if,” which functions “as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality and into the world of imagination. [N]obody obliges you to believe anything” (qtd. in Trask 132). This “take-it-or-leave-it mood of ‘maybe’” is not a claim to truth for Trask, but a way of understanding the world as part of one’s own subjective making (Trask 45, 140). The Method, then, can be understood as a rejection of ontological claims in favor of ethico-epistemological ones, ostensibly restoring self-hood to its former, exalted status. “The Method’s founders,” Trask proposes, “saw performance as attaining an authenticity that sheer self-identity could not produce” (130). Accordingly, the Method seemingly not only restored self-hood, but

enhanced it. The Method may not have completely revitalized the liberal humanist subject, but, at the level of perception, it might as well have.

REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE AND THE PRACTICE OF THE METHOD

With its implicit theorization of a postwar subject, the Method valorized a rebellious, nonconforming individualism. In its aestheticization of the Method's concepts, *Rebel Without a Cause* juxtaposes the figure of the Method actor with that of the rebel.¹⁰⁰ First and foremost a rejection of formulaic performances engendered by classical acting (and type acting in particular), Method acting can be understood as a particular style or posture of rebellion. In the opening scenes of the film, two officers arrest Jim and take him to the juvenile division of the local police station. Noticing that Jim's recently arrived parents are making him less likely to discuss his behavior, Detective Ray Fremick (Edward Platt) invites Jim back into his office to talk alone. Once alone with Jim, Ray begins by sizing Jim up: "Big tough character. You don't kid me, pal. How come you're not wearing your boots?" For Ray, who shares the director's name, Jim is performing the part of the "big tough character," the rebel, who, like practitioners of Method acting, "flaunted [their] nonconformity" (Cohan 241). Ray, in a move fitting of a casting director and a sociologist, effectively typecasts Jim as a juvenile delinquent, rebel, and nonconformist. In response, Jim tries to punch Ray. For Jim, it is not enough to be granted these identities: those identities ostensibly must be proved through action rather than just association. Elsewhere, Jim's actions seem appropriate to those of the titular rebel character: getting arrested

¹⁰⁰ At the level of national consciousness, "The young rebel," Leerom Medovoi argues, "emerged at dawn of the Cold War era because the ideological production of the United States as the leader of the 'free world' required figures who represent America's emancipatory character, whether in relation to the Soviet Union, the new nations of the third world, or even its own suburbs" (1). According to Medovoi, the figure of "the young rebel" was necessary to shore up America's understanding of itself as "free." America's national narrative of "the young rebel" can be understood a response against those norms in the form of conformity (embodied by the suburbs).

for underage drinking and assault, yelling at his parents, attempting to punch an officer, and expressing sexual interest in both Plato and Judy. For Jim, and Method practitioners more broadly, if individuality was to be found in performance, it was in the performance of rebellion.

Though Jim begins the film as a rebellious loner, as the narrative continues, he tries to translate his rebellion into a social setting. On a field trip to the Griffith Observatory, Jim and the other students in his high school watch a presentation in the planetarium. During the presentation, Jim sits two rows behind Judy and Buzz (Corey Allen), a gang leader who is Judy's boyfriend. Sitting next to and in the row behind Judy and Buzz is a group Judy calls "the kids," a gang of young rebels that serve as the film's exaggerated representation of cultural anxieties about juvenile delinquency.¹⁰¹ Embodied by "the kids" in the film, "delinquent subculture," James Gilbert writes, "was certainly not the absence of social order; it was the wrong social order . . . , an alternative mode of behavior for children who for one reason or another could not or refused to accept the predominant (middle-class) values of core culture" (135, emphasis added). Accordingly, the group is disruptive during the planetarium talk. At the midpoint of the talk, the presenter describes Cancer while Buzz points to its projection on the planetarium ceiling. Amused, Buzz snickers to himself as he walks his fingers over Judy's upper chest, as if his hand were a crab, saying "I'm a crab." Sharing Buzz's infantile sense of humor, "the kids" and Jim chuckle to themselves. The presenter hears the laughter, which causes him to pause before continuing. At this point in the film, Jim is a complete outsider: he is not part of "the kids," but wants to be because he knows Judy is a part of the group, and he finds the group's antics attractive. Consequently, when the presenter introduces the next constellation, "Taurus,

¹⁰¹ For more on cultural anxieties about Juvenile Delinquency, see James Gilbert.

the bull,” Jim starts mooing in hopes getting a laugh from “the kids.” However, Jim is disappointed when “the kids” respond with displeasure.

Jim’s disruptive behavior can be interpreted as an act of rebellion, but it is also an attempted act of conformity to the expectations of “the kids.” Early in the film Jim Stark lives up to the name of the titular rebel, but his rebellion, like that of the Method actor, does not ensure his individuality, a particular sense of perceived control the Method promises. Jim’s efforts to “join the club,” depict Jim, oddly to be sure, as one of David Riesman’s “‘other-directed’ [people], concerned more with fitting in than standing out” (Kimmel 241). Like Jim’s rebel conformity, the Method can be understood as half-hearted participation in the system against which one rebels. As he fights with switchblades, drives fast cars in a chickie run, and sports Lee jeans with his famous red jacket, Jim can be interpreted as, at once, a rebel and a conformist.¹⁰²

A similar dynamic underlies the creation of Method acting. Engaged in a kind of rebellion against classical acting, Method performers became distinctive in both their posture of rebellion and their aura of “authenticity,” an authenticity based on rejection of the formulaic performances found in classical acting in general and melodramatic type acting, in particular. As the Method rose to cultural prominence, it became institutionalized in acting schools—most notably, The Actors Studio—and onscreen, attracting such directors as Elia Kazan and Nicholas Ray. “The Method,” Trask observes, “conferred [primacy] on the school as its theater of operations” (130). Stella Adler maintained that Method “Acting is not just imitating everyday behavior. It’s capturing the essence of it” (56). “It is no small irony that the triumph of Method acting,” Trask writes, “has had the effect of turning into formula what its creators understood as

¹⁰² Jonathan Mitchell terms Jim an “individual conformist” (134, 144).

a dismantling of theatrical conventions” (130). Imitation, then, was the formal antithesis of Method acting that became the informal rule. Virginia Wexman has shown that Method Performances, with their “histrionic affectations,” “quickly assumed the status of clichés” (167). On the one hand, though Method performances became clichés, they were still distinct in their rebellion against classical acting. But on the other, the institutionalization of the Method no longer offered its practitioners a radical rebellion; instead, the institutionalization of the Method created a new form of conformity, a club not unlike that of “the kids.” Thus, even the rebellion of Jim Stark, and the Method more broadly, could not ensure individuality long-term.

The film further dramatizes the rebel’s struggle for individuality in a scene outside the Griffith Observatory. Following the presentation, “the kids” go outside and gather around Jim’s car. From atop the observatory steps, Jim and Plato look down at the kids. After seeing Judy staring at Jim, Buzz opens a switchblade and knifes one of Jim’s tires. Not visibly angry, Jim simply saunters down the steps to change his tire. When Jim remains calm, Buzz and the rest of “the kids” start clucking like chickens, to which, Jim responds, “Is that meaning me? Is that meaning me!?” Satisfied at his ability to solicit the desired response, Buzz says, “yes” before challenging Jim to a “blade game,” a short bout of knife play with “no sticking, only jabbing.” Again, Jim resists. Though Jim tells Buzz that he “thought only punks fought with knives,” Buzz assures him that “it’s not fighting, it’s [an] examination,” a necessary prerequisite Jim must meet before he can join the club. While Jim originally treats the “blade game” as a nuisance, he agrees to play after he realizes that the game offers him the opportunity to both prove that he is not a “chicken” and possibly to earn entrance into the club. As Jim agrees to “play,” he, in effect, agrees to a kind of exchange: to “play” the part of the outsider to become an insider.

Jim's performance, like that of the Method actor, is designed to cultivate the subjective perception of a "coherent identity" rather than simply an external impression. Of impression management, Goffman writes, "Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain" (6). While Jim considers his audience as he lets them set the terms of the exchange, he is not only or even primarily trying "to evoke from them a specific response" in order to gain social capital like Buzz. Jim agrees to the exchange as a way to maintain a certain identity (that of "the big tough character" who is not a "chicken") and create a new one (as a member of a friend group). In an effort to create an appellation that captures the role of the "big tough character," Buzz gives Jim the more aggressive sounding nickname, "Jack." Buzz, like Goffman's social actor, "impute[s] a self to" Jim's "performed character," in effect suggesting that Jim is merely the role that he performs in front of the group. Jim, however, is not torn between the group's desires (to see him fight) and his own (to understand himself a certain way), as these desires overlap. Jim's performance is as much about proving his "own coherence across time" and that he is "a big tough character" as it is about his audience's perception of him. Accordingly, the film portrays Jim as "sincere," motivated by, as Pomerance explains, an "ethical devotion . . . to an unperformed self, a liberated and also unconstructed capacity for committed response" (44).

Though the film largely takes for granted the concept of "sincerity," this sincerity is undermined by the construction of the filmic body. "Sincerity," implies a lack of artfulness while the filmic body, by contrast, is defined by its self-conscious construction: its framing within the shot, its position on set, its rehearsed, made-up quality, and its placement within filmic time. Method performances, first formulated for the stage, at least feigned a connection between

performance time and real time. That is, despite the construction of stage time, the audience and the characters on stage moved through time at the same rate. In addition to this sense of shared time, Peggy Phelan asserts that “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (146). Live performance thus creates a kind of reality principle based on the shared time of the audience and performer and its unrepeatability. This sense of shared time ostensibly mirrored the real-time social performance of “everyday life,” even as such performances hid their conditions of production.

Compared to the temporality of the stage body, the filmic body of the character is at least thrice removed from the time of the audience. First, for any given scene, a director is likely to film multiple takes. Second, most scenes are filmed from multiple cameras at different intervals. Third, by the time the audience sees the final product, a film will have been edited to both compress the film’s time and create rhythm, tone, and a coherent narrative. This is not to say that the theater is more “real” than film. Rather, the construction of the filmic body is simply more readily apparent, especially in films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* that rely on spectacle and melodrama. The knife fight scene, for example, filmed at the Griffith Observatory atop Mount Hollywood, is only about two minutes long but features well over thirty cuts, moving between several camera locations.

Whereas the stage body hides the conditions in which the performers fashion their performance but mirrors its real time construction, the filmic body does the opposite. That is, film hides the temporal construction of the body, but reveals “what is typically hidden—what Dean wanted to reveal . . . , the filthy residue of the front . . . , [and] the contradictory impulse

that can belie the coherent presentation of self in which the performer is ostensibly engaged” (Pomerance 47). The temporal construction of the filmic body thus mirrors the construction of “the front,” which, Pomerance shows, is characterized by “the capital and exploitation of capital involved in mounting the visible presentation. By capital I here mean the whole gamut of resources the actor must use, from physique through cultural experience and education to carefully practiced techniques of movement. What is backstage of face, then, is work” (47). The filmic body and the front are characterized not just by what is seen, but by what is not seen, what is intentionally or unintentionally “hidden” from view (Pomerance 49). For example, with each cut, James Dean as Jim Stark presumably had to get back into character, just as when one re-enters a social setting. However “sincere” its performers or “authentic” its performances, the filmic body, in highlighting “the filthy residue of the front,” reveals the falseness of even the most “honest” performance styles like Method acting.

The Method’s focus on “‘if’ statements allow actors to avoid the all-or-none choice between reality and falsity by orienting them instead to the ‘honesty’ of suppositions,” that is, toward perception over external reality (Trask 132). The construction of Method performances do not entail that Jim’s “sincerity” is itself insincere. According to the logic of the Method, the actor’s perception of his own performance was as much a sign of authenticity as his self-conscious construction. Jim’s devotion to the “naked self,” designed to “reveal the filthy residue of the front,” certainly “makes a real world impossible,” but it cannot be said to be insincere (Pomerance 49). Situated in external conditions, however, the Method’s dogged insistence on ideas that focus on perception (such as sincerity), as we will see, will ultimately become the practitioner’s tacit assent to the oppression of others.

The film's foregrounding of Jim's body in the knife fight suggests that the Method, primarily a means to establish a subjective perception of control (of one's actions and personal identity), can, in some cases, lead to a degree of actual control. Jim's body (and thereby that of the Method actor) then becomes a site of power: simultaneously, an instrument Jim can manipulate, the object featured in the spectacle of the performance, and the standard by which "the kids" judge Jim's performance. As Strasberg told his students, "The actor himself is the instrument of expression which calls for special care like a rare Stradivarius" (1). Later, Strasberg asserts, "everything that was conditioned can be reconditioned" (7). Unlike Vance Packard and others who suggested that conditioning challenged human autonomy, Strasberg understood conditioning as a way to reclaim agency. For Strasberg, the actor is both "the instrument of expression" and the object acted upon. As an "instrument of expression," the body, Strasberg suggests, requires "special care," which entails pursuing a healthy lifestyle and constant reconditioning, or, using Strasberg's metaphor, retuning.

The film itself does not feature much "back stage" in which Jim reconditions himself, but Jim's performance during the subsequent "game" shows an unnatural mastery of his instrument, suggesting a level of finesse that can only be learned by conditioning. In this shot, Buzz (left) and Jim (right) stand opposite one another.



Figure 9. A “Blade Game” in Nicholas Ray’s 1955 *Rebel Without a Cause*

Jim is standing on the balls of his feet leaning ever-so-slightly toward his extended right leg, a stance akin to that of the boxer, affording him both balance and quickness-of-movement. Jim is not directly facing Buzz, but standing so that his body will appear positioned almost sideways to Buzz; this positioning gives Jim a defensive advantage by making his own body a smaller target—only his side is exposed. Jim’s performance is pragmatic, concerned more with results than “impressions.” Opposite Jim, Buzz is spread out, standing with most of his weight on one leg, directly facing Jim, which renders Buzz slow, ineffective, and vulnerable to attack. Though Buzz, no doubt, wants to win the “game” (otherwise he would not pout in defeat), he constantly trades tactical advantages as a fighter for his perceived entertainment value as a performer, taunting Jim with childish antics, including his imitation of the movements and sounds of a monkey. Buzz, again, resembles Goffman’s social actor who “express[es] himself in a given way solely to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response” (6). In addition to their contrasting defensive styles, Jim and Buzz employ different offensive styles. Jim holds his switchblade loosely at waist height with the tip of the weapon

slightly elevated, which gives Jim the opportunity to quickly thrust the switchblade out and upward. Buzz tightly grips the handle of his switchblade at chest height, pointing the tip of the blade downward as if it were a dagger. Consequently, Buzz would first need to raise the switchblade before he could strike, an action that would take considerably more time than Jim's quick thrusts. Unsurprisingly, Buzz's childish antics lead to his defeat. Jim, by contrast, proves his skill as a fighter with greater control of his instrument, his body.

According to the Method, Jim's control of his actions translates into control of his identity. For, Stella Adler told her students, "What you do is who you are" (170). Though Adler is explicitly discussing the primacy of action in Method performances, she is also connecting action to identity. The Method subject creates the perception of her own identity through action. If the Method subject creates identity through action, a corollary would be that one's identity is one's actions, or, at least a composite of those actions. The stable subject then becomes the performing subject, suggesting that the identity of the Method actor might be as ephemeral as the performance (of the action) itself, which undermines the "coherence [of the self] across time" (Trask 128). In its twin emphases on action and a stable sense of self-identity, the Method buckles under the weight of its own logic. In the knife fight and his previous interaction with Detective Ray, Jim shows that his incessant desire to be "a big tough character" must be complemented with matching performances, resulting in a seemingly endless cycle of Jim trying to prove himself. As Phelan notes, "Self-identity needs to be continually reproduced and reassured precisely because it fails to secure belief" (4). Jim's insistence on proving his self-identity is as much about the actor's "will to believe" in a stable identity as about that belief itself. In its insistence on a coherent self despite its focus on the performing subject, the Method can be understood as a search for an essential, stable identity. "Teachers like Adler urged their

students to turn the ‘job’ of acting into the search for essence,” Trask points out (133). If anything, though, Jim’s performances suggest an absence of a stable identity. For if such an identity were readily apparent, would Jim continuously try to prove it?

Though the knife fight affords Jim an opportunity to prove that he is “Jack”—that “big tough character”—such an opportunity comes at the cost of becoming a spectacle.¹⁰³ Stella Adler exhorted her students: “You are in control. You are never out of control. You’re the master. You own the thing” (138). Though the Method promises the perception of control, spectacle undermines this sense of control in reality. For, performance exceeds the bounds of what the performer can control: perception. In Figure III, the location stresses the danger of Jim’s performance and thereby the fragility of his body.



Figure 10. “A hostile audience” in in Nicholas Ray’s 1955 *Rebel Without a Cause*

The scene’s location, too, diminishes the perceived power of the performer as Jim’s body becomes small next to the overlook. Such shots suggest that Jim can be understood not as a “big

¹⁰³ Later, the film further underscores the fragility of the body as spectacle in the chickie run as Buzz and Jim race cars toward the edge of a cliff; unfortunately, Buzz fails to get out of the car in time and dies as a result.

tough character,” but, at best, as a “little tough character” or, at worst, just a “little character.”¹⁰⁴ The still further suggests that spectacle not only divests Jim of power, but actually relocates that power in the audience. As the audience leans forward in anticipation, as if to demonstrate their readiness to close in on the performers at any moment, they reveal their complicity in the violence. Addressing the power dynamics of performance, Phelan writes, “The silent spectator dominates and controls the exchange” (163). Spectacle thus returns the audience to its position of primacy in “everyday life” where Goffman had placed it. Though as Trask writes of the Method, “the inner truth of a performance matters more to an actor than any audience attending to it,” the actual power dynamics of spectacular performances would make it increasingly difficult for the performer to even feel empowered. In such moments, Jim becomes no more than an object for others.

Although *Rebel Without a Cause* grants Jim some sense of agency, he, interestingly, uses that agency, in part, to become an “erotic spectacle” later in the film (Mulvey 835). As such, Jim chooses to be defined not by the action of the hero, but by inaction of the fetishized object, what Laura Mulvey famously termed “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 837). Placed in the context of Method acting, man-as-image further complicates Adler’s exhortation: “You are in control. You are never out of control. You’re the master.” Following the chickie run, Jim drives Judy home with Plato in tow. After dropping Judy off at home, Jim drives across the street to his house. Before leaving, Plato talks to Jim outside his house. In the still from the scene, Jim (left) and Plato (right) stand close to one another.

¹⁰⁴ For a similar reading on the environment’s impact on the viewer’s perception of the Method actor’s masculinity, see Virginia Wexman 174–75.



Figure 11. “Double Awareness” in Nicholas Ray’s 1955 *Rebel Without a Cause*

On the right, Plato looks intently at Jim with an expression suggestive of desire, child-like wonder, and timidity. On the left, Jim is in profile looking away as he purses his lips. Jim’s pompadour haircut and red, popped-collar jacket evoke the now-iconic image of Hollywood’s rebel hero. Here, Jim’s performance reflects one of Strasberg’s commands: “You must become aware of yourself and your body, like the double awareness of the writer who corrects his own punctuation” (5). As such, Jim (and thereby the Method actor) is both the performer and audience. Jim’s “carefully practiced techniques of movement [and] expression,” suggest he has performed often enough that he knows how to manipulate his body to achieve a desired effect: to highlight his own sexuality, revealing his desire to be desired (Pomerance 47). Moreover, Jim’s pose suggests an awareness of his audience: Plato. As Leerom Medovoi notes, “Plato’s status as a closeted figure in the film finds numerous forms of confirmation, whether in assertions to that effect by the screenwriter . . . or in textual cues that range from the most general (Sal Mineo’s delicate features) to the specific (scenes where Plato has a male pinup in his locker, or most explicitly when he invites Jim to spend the night)” (186). Mirroring Steven Cohan’s description

of fellow Method actor Montgomery Clift, Jim “does not act upon desire but excites it in the person who looks at him, thereby soliciting a male gaze just as readily as a female one” (Cohan 217). Jim, then, is not just a beautiful body, a passive object the spectator views with pleasure, but an active participant in his own objectification, inviting Plato’s penetrating gaze that renders him vulnerable.¹⁰⁵

The film suggests that the Method’s explicit focus on the perception of control and its supposedly emancipatory nature is further undermined the coercion of role switching. During the course of their conversation outside Jim’s house, Plato, in a thinly veiled sexual overture, invites Jim over to spend the night to “talk.” As Plato propositions him, Jim looks intently into Plato’s eyes for much of the conversation, which implies that Jim is, at least in part, interested in the offer. While the film does not make explicit whether Jim is bisexual, his consideration of Plato’s proposition and his self-conscious pose that invites Plato’s gaze points to what Graham McCann calls his “ambiguous sexual identity” (151). In a conversation with Judy, Plato, embracing Jim’s “ambiguous sexual identity,” refers to Jim as the softer, more androgynous “Jamie.” “In fifties films,” Virginia Wexman argues, “homosexuality . . . was rather sympathetically depicted as a normal phase of maturation. [A] confused gender identity was no longer understood as a symbol of ineradicable moral decay but a developmental problem of a divided protagonist” (168–69). The film’s portrayal of Jim’s “ambiguous sexual identity” is presented as one such “developmental problem,” a “problem” specifically addressed by Lindner’s psychological ‘study.’ Accordingly, the film grants Jim the space and time to explore his “ambiguous sexual identity” on the basis that his actions reflect a phase of development with a fixed end point. The

¹⁰⁵ At this point, Plato holds the gaze, but the audience does not; this possibility for the audience is foreclosed by the shot’s lighting that partially shadows Jim, creating the feeling of depth and distinctiveness of character.

actor who plays the role of the sexually ambiguous male must be willing to relinquish that role to play the role of an unambiguously heterosexual male.

While Jim eventually learns to play the role of the unambiguously heterosexual male, it is only after a period of intense self-surveillance. Jim appears to carefully consider Plato's offer as he maintains eye contact throughout most of the conversation and does not immediately reject the offer. However, toward the end of the conversation, Jim diverts his attention away from Plato's eyes to Judy's house: the symbol of his heterosexual object choice. Once he looks at Judy's house for a moment, he rejects Plato's offer outright. In that moment, one of the Method's mechanisms of control, "double awareness," becomes a mechanism of self-surveillance. Jim's near simultaneous self-surveillance and rejection of Plato's advances can be read as his disavowal of "nonnormative" sexualities and his acquiescence to heteronormativity. After this moment, Jim directs his affections only toward Judy.¹⁰⁶ Jim's "double awareness," a sign of the actor's control of his body and a means of maintaining the perception of control (even if that perception is based on the relinquishing of control), then becomes its opposite: a mechanism of self-policing and evidence of one's acquiescence to mainstream social conventions.

Though it would be reasonable to assume that the narrative would follow Jim's development into a unique, anti-conformist rebel hero as the word "rebel" appears in the title, the film follows an opposite trajectory, ending when Jim has lost every semblance of uniqueness and control. Jim's transition from one role (the ambiguous bisexual male) to the next (the unambiguously heterosexual male), interestingly, reflects way the Method envisions actualizing a character. In her classes, Stella Adler told her students: "If you do something, you become somebody . . . What you do is who you are" (170). Acting the part, then, translates into becoming

¹⁰⁶ Throughout the remainder of the film, Jim's affection toward Plato is more akin to a father than a lover, marking his "successful" transition from the ambiguously sexual male to the unambiguously heterosexual male.

the part, regardless of intent. Though Adler was attempting to show her students that they can create authentic performances by relying on the body, her tone makes her words sound like a warning: to perform an action is to become someone else, so actors should be careful about which actions they perform.¹⁰⁷

As if in response, *Rebel Without a Cause* dramatizes this anxiety in the mansion scene and the events that follow. After learning that “the kids” are looking for Jim (most likely, to assault or murder him), Judy and Jim go to an old, abandoned mansion that Plato had pointed out earlier in the day. Soon after arriving, Plato joins them, at which point the group begins “playing house”: Judy and Jim play the role of married home buyers while Plato, always stuck between roles, plays the roles of realtor and son.



Figure 12. “Playing house” in in Nicholas Ray’s 1955 *Rebel Without a Cause*

Jim and Judy do their best impressions of serious suburbanites, emphasizing the superficiality of such conventional roles. In a mocking and exaggerated tone, Jim and Judy discuss such mundane topics as budget constraints (“three million dollars a month” is apparently manageable), space for

¹⁰⁷ For more on the Method’s treatment of the body, see Trask 128–33.

children, and the decision to buy or rent. For the group, this self-conscious roleplaying is merely a joke with which to amuse themselves. However, as Adler told her students, “feeling comes from doing” (93). Therefore, by the end of the night, the performance is no longer a joke. Jim and Judy have become the model heterosexual couple. Not consciously choosing to become the roles they were playing in “real life,” the group’s self-conscious performance in the mansion thus exceeds its intention, and thereby the will of the actors involved. Jim’s explicit rejection of dominant ideology becomes his implicit acceptance of that ideology.



Figure 13. “The model heterosexual couple and Jim as “The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit”” in Nicholas Ray’s 1955 *Rebel Without a Cause*

As his performance exceeds its intention, Jim effectively becomes a double of himself with a permeable identity, more like a victim of brainwashing than a mythic rebel. In the beginning of the film, as Nabokov might say, he was Jim, plain Jim, rebelling against familial and societal expectations; he was the perpetual boy “Jimbo” at home. He was the aggressive “Jack” at school with “the kids”; he was the softer, androgynous “Jamie” with Plato (Sal Mineo); but, in the arms of Judy, he was always the intimate, playful “Jimmy.” And at the end of the film, he became Jim again, but this time denoting the name of his father, Jim Backus, the film’s “man in the grey flannel suit,” the paradigmatic symbol of 1950s conformity. Though Jim is figured as

somewhat of an active agent in the film, he does not choose any of these names. Rather, with each name, Jim's performances exceed the bounds of the performances themselves, as his onscreen audience attributes a new identity to Jim in the form of a name. Jim becomes a double of himself (simultaneously Jim and not-Jim) comprised of identities that he did and did not choose. As Jim conforms to societal expectations, he, not unlike a victim of brainwashing, loses a degree of uniqueness as he becomes a kind of passive receptacle of ideology. "Conformism," Jeff Smith asserts, "yields the same complaint . . . as brainwashing does. The difference is that the conformist is minimally aware of his or her surrender of self-determination while the brainwashed person is not" (262). According to Smith, the conformist and the victim of brainwashing are both passive; their only distinction is the awareness of the subject. As he internalizes consensus culture's mechanisms of control, Jim becomes more and more unaware of his actions and his own identity, placing Jim firmly in the position of the brainwashing victim. More important than Jim's sense of control and personal identity, however, are the external realities that the group's performance engenders.

The Method's focus on perception, in the film, is figured as a force connected to real external harm. After shooting an officer, Plato, gun in hand, runs from the mansion to the nearby Griffith Observatory. Soon after, Jim and Judy follow. Once arrived at the observatory, Jim manages to take the bullets out of the gun without Plato noticing. As he gives the gun back to Plato, Jim offers him his red jacket. However, "The red jacket, metaphorically linked to the jacket sleeve that catches on the door handle and causes Buzz's fiery death," Susan White notes "is an ambiguous gift. It seems to pass along Jim's own rebelliousness to the younger teen" (61).



Figure 14. “The clothes make the man” in Nicholas Ray’s 1955 *Rebel Without a Cause*

Like Jim and Judy, by dressing for the part of the rebel, Plato becomes the part. When Plato walks outside, an act of literal “coming out,” the police shine spotlights on Plato, exposing him to their blinding gaze. Scared, Plato runs, at which point the police shoot and kill him. In the words of Sal Mineo, Plato “had to be bumped off, out of the way” at the end of the film because of his homosexuality. Similarly, George M. Wilson writes that “it is because there is no social space for [Plato] to occupy that he is destroyed” (126).

Jim and Judy “become” the model heterosexual couple at the moment of Plato’s death: shortly thereafter, Jim introduces Judy to his parents, a sign of “normal” courtship. For Jim and Judy to “become” the model heterosexual couple, difference must be ignored and suppressed. More specifically, the maintenance of “normal” relationships depends on the repression and oppression of “deviant” ones. The humanism of the Method thus becomes its opposite: a kind of numbness and cold indifference.

As Jim and Judy become fused together through the death of Plato, the supposed emancipatory potential of the Method’s focus (and thereby that of late naturalism) on perception

is rendered, at best, irrelevant or, at worst, oppressive and repressive. Plato does not have the luxury of retreating into perception; the fact of his death supersedes others' perception of it. The move away from a focus on material causes to a focus on individual perception in late naturalism ultimately ends up reinstating the necessity of classic naturalism's embrace of determinism and its desire to trace every phenomenon to its ultimate cause. For, without it, we end up with injustice, but no way to remedy it, much less explain it. The world according to late naturalism, then, is one of injustice without a cause.

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