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Yu, Byung Sun

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**America(s) in Early Twentieth Century Ethnic Minority Writing:
Younghill Kang and Richard Wright**

**By
Byung Sun Yu**

**A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Committee in charge:

**Professor Elaine Kim, Chair
Professor Sau-ling Wong
Professor Marcial González**

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ABSTRACT

America(s) in Early Twentieth Century Ethnic Minority Writing: Younghill Kang and Richard Wright

by
Byung Sun Yu

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies
University of California, Berkeley

Professor Elaine Kim, Chair

In this dissertation, I explore the meanings of “America(s)” in the fictional works by early twentieth century ethnic minority writers—Younghill Kang and Richard Wright. They reveal the heterogeneity of America as opposed to the myth of America as a singular formation. I attempt to approach American racialized ethnic minority literature comparatively, to avoid the limitations of focusing on writers of one background. Comparative approaches account for the particular social, cultural, historical, political, and geographical contingencies of different ethnic groups. In the first chapter on Younghill Kang’s *East Goes West*, I argue that America is a reified society, which is very different from the society Kang has dreamed for a long time. Analyzing Kang’s autobiographical novel *East Goes West*, I employ the theoretical frame of “reification” to explore the social structure that prevents Han, Kang’s alter ego, from being accepted as an American no matter how ardently he wishes for acceptance. I argue that though he criticizes a reified American society such as rationalization, quantification, and objectification, his criticism of the society is based on an anachronistic organic romanticism.

In the second chapter, I focus on the notions of ‘whiteness’ and ‘spatial logic’ in considering the America of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. For Wright, America is a place where whiteness is omnipresent. Whiteness, as the privileged signifier, always reminds African Americans of the power and control that hangs over them. The logic of whiteness powerfully influences the lives of African Americans by excluding them. Also, I argue that it has much to do with logic of space, which defines and determines the fatal social relationships of the protagonist Bigger Thomas’s life and his limited political consciousness. Also, I scrutinize the relationship between Richard Wright and the Communist Party of USA. In the process, I address the issue of race and class. In conclusion, I examine several commonalities and differences between Kang and Wright.

DEDICATION

To my late father, who raised six children with love and care, working as a fisherman in a small village during his life.

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This dissertation would not have been possible were it not for the support and care of Professor Elaine Kim. Literally, with her expert guidance and kind help, I have been able to finish this dissertation. She even visited Korea several times and encouraged me to finish what I have begun. I still have not found the proper words to express my deepest gratitude for her. I also want to thank Professor Sau-ling Wong, who was enormously generous in taking the time to read all manuscripts closely and offer productive suggestions for revision. Furthermore, I am especially grateful to Professor Marcial Gonzalez, whose insight and the depth of scholarship provided me with numerous of ideas about this dissertation. I cannot forget how amazing his seminar class was. It was one of the best classes I had attended in U.C. Berkeley.

I wish to thank my mother, Ok-Kyu Chung for her unconditional love and sacrifice. My thanks are extended to my six nephews as well—Jaemin, Jaehyun, Sangjun, Sangho, Jaewon, and Jaehyuk. I hope all of my nephews will survive happily in the jungle called capitalism.

Lastly, I want to express my deepest love to my two boys, Seongmin and Sunjae, and to their mother Hyun Sun.

It certainly has been a long journey to the finish. Much has happened in the process of writing this dissertation. I hope there will only be happy stories to tell in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Looking back at the 1930s from the 1960s, Lionel Trilling observed:

In any view of the American cultural situation, the importance of the radical movement of the Thirties cannot be overestimated. It may be said to have created the American intellectual class as we now know it in its great size and influence. It fixed the character of this class as being, through all mutations of opinion, predominantly of the Left. And quite apart from opinion, the political tendency of the Thirties defined the style of the class from that radicalism came the moral urgency, the sense of crisis, and the concern with personal salvation that mark the existence of American intellectuals.

The importance of the 1930s is further stressed when Michael Denning, referring to Trilling, states that “whether we think of culture as the norms, values, beliefs, and ways of life of particular groups of people or in a more limited sense, as the texts, artifacts, and performances,” the 1930s, especially the age of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), marked the first time in the history of the United States the left—the tradition of radical democratic movements for social transformation—had a central, indeed shaping, impact on American culture.¹

In 1933 and 1934, nation-wide strikes were called all across U.S. industries. “A new militancy and solidarity among American workers appeared as the battles of San Francisco’s longshoremen, Minneapolis’s teamsters, and Toledo’s auto-parts workers won the allegiance of citizens. General strikes brought each city to a halt, figuring a cooperative commonwealth.”² During these years of general strikes, young writers proclaimed themselves “proletarians” and “revolutionaries.” Richard Wright later stated the revolutionary “workers’ struggle” in the early 1930s brought him into direct contact with the Communist Party.³ Also, Carlos Bulosan wrote of a lettuce strike in Lompoc, “The strike taught me that I was definitely a part of the labor movement... from this day onward my life became one long conspiracy... I was so intensely fired by this dream of a better America that I had completely forgotten myself.”⁴ Denning reminds us that through such strikes based on class struggle, a new radical culture was shaped. He defines this culture as a “cultural front,” at the heart of which was a new generation of plebian artists and intellectuals who had grown up in the immigrant and black working class neighborhoods of the modern metropolis. They

¹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 3.

² *Ibid.*, xiv.

³ Gabriel Mendes, “A Deeper Science: Richard Wright, Dr. Fredric Wertham, and the Fight for Mental Healthcare in Harlem, NY, 1940-1960” (Ph. D. diss. Brown University, 2010), 19.

⁴ Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, xiv.

were the second generation of the second wave of immigration, along with African Americans who had migrated from South to North.”⁵ Writers such as Richard Wright, Carlos Bulosan, Tillie Olsen, Thomas Bell, Toshio Mori, and Clifford Odets, and critics like Philip Rahv, Alfred Kazan, and Irving Howe were among the members of the cultural front movement.⁶ Louis Adamic called them “new Americans.”⁷ They formed proletarian literary clubs and published proletarian stories and poems in little magazines such as *Blast*, *Anvil*, *Partisan Review*, *Left Front*, and *Dynamo*.⁸

During the 1930s and 1940s, one of the main issues among left groups was how to define contemporary America. The issue was foregrounded when American Communist Party general secretary Earl Browder campaigned for the party’s presidency in 1936 using the slogan “communism is twentieth-century Americanism.” Browder advocated extending the hand of “fellowship and cooperation to Republicans, Democrats and Socialists, as well as to those of no party at all,” calling for everyone to work together “to defend culture, to unite culture with the strivings of the people, to preserve and extend our democratic heritage, to assist our brothers in other lands who are suffering the bestial assaults of fascism.”⁹

This dissertation explores the meanings of “America(s)” in the fictional works by the two ethnic minority writers—Younghill Kang and Richard Wright—as they reveal the heterogeneity of America as opposed to the myth of America as a singular formation. I approach American racialized ethnic minority literature comparatively, to avoid the limitations of focusing on writers of one background. Comparative approaches account for the particular social, cultural, historical, political, and geographical contingencies of different ethnic groups.

The emancipatory message of the 1930s and 1940s literary leftism and radicalism still retains much of its force. As long as inequality and exploitation based on race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality exist, egalitarian social movements will exist. If people who associate themselves with progressive values and notions do not accept that, Barbara Foley suggests, selfishness is “original sin,” leading the efforts of creating truly egalitarian societies to failure. People must instead understand where movements within such attempts spring forth from.¹⁰ In the work of Kang and Wright, we can see the intersectionality of race and class, a focal point of contemporary cultural and ethnic studies.

However, the works of these writers are not proletarian literature in traditional terms in that they do not address class consciousness as a core rhetorical and thematic representation and they do not illuminate why Marxism constructs class dually as a subject position and a moment in the historical dialectic.¹¹ Instead, I locate them in

⁵ Ibid., 60-61.

⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁷ Ibid., 60.

⁸ Ibid., xv.

⁹ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States 1900-1954* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 242.

¹⁰ Barbara Foley, *Radical Presentations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University, 1993), viii-ix, 65.

¹¹ Ibid., ix.

the context of the Popular Front movement.¹² Especially, it is my suggestion that these two writers share some ideals of the Popular Front movement to some extent. Of course the degree of participation of each writer varies according to his viewpoints about the movement as well as to geopolitical location. To a significant extent, Younghill Kang speaks from the Eastern Coast, especially New York, and Philadelphia; Richard Wright from Chicago.

This manuscript consists of an introduction, two main body chapters, and a conclusion. The first body chapter focuses primarily on the meanings of America in Younghill Kang's fictional autobiography *East Goes West*. I choose this text because it illustrates the earliest phase of literature of Asian American group. His book is, in a sense, "representative of the genesis of Asian American literature."¹³ Younghill Kang is the first Korean American novelist and his book reveals the diversity of class, region, education, and culture even within the boundary of Asian American community. The second chapter deploys the notions of "whiteness" and "logic of space" to scrutinize Wright's America in *Native Son*.

Both of the novels display the anxieties associated with assuming social identities in the face of class and racial conflicts. In spite of the delimited point of view they embody which derive from each of their cultural, historical and spatial

¹² The Popular Front, which emerged in 1935, brought together a coalition forces: anti-fascist activism, feminism, New Deal social policies, laborist social democracy, solidarity with the Spanish Civil War, Civil Rights agitation all of which exerted a powerful influence on writers of this period. In regard to the opposing viewpoints on the Popular Front Americanism, see Gary Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism: the Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (New York: the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1989), 6. Also see Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Fantheon Books, 1984), 75-85. Gary Gerstle, a labor historian, states that "few words in the 1930s American labor movement resounded as broadly as "Americanism." He defends the politics of patriotism for the popular front like Eric Browder, who advocated imbuing the Communist Party USA with an Americanism "as innocuous and unassailable an aura as mom and apple pie." On the other hand, influential historian Warren Susman views the Americanism of the popular front era as the "carrier of profoundly conservative political impulses." He characterizes the popular front both "sentimental" as well as "shallow," contending that "out of it came an absurd vision of the American past, a peculiar notion of American culture in general." In a critical juncture in American history, Susman argues, socialists failed to "illuminate our understanding of the world and ourselves" and by clinging to Americanism, they allowed revolutionary thought to be moved to the periphery at a critical moment. Susman is the most critical of popular front culture among left scholars. Invoking "Americanism," terms like "New Deal icons like the Blue Eagle," and mass cultural images like Frank Capra's nostalgic movies gave Americans a sense of comfort and security in uneasy times, pushing them towards conformity instead of rebellion. Susman particularly condemned the American Communists and socialists of the era for failing to move beyond Fordist visions and doing nothing to challenge the fundamental structure of capitalist society, serving to cement it instead. Susman's thinking is in line with non-Stalinist Marxists such as William Phillips and Philip Rahv, 1930s editors of the *Partisan Review* who were skeptical about the belief that Marxism was compatible with the Americanism.

¹³ Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 33.

backgrounds, the main protagonists aspire to convey a “sense of society as a whole, which is to say, they dimly reveal the class contradictions” implicit in the politics they critique through their contradictory ideological positions.¹⁴ As Terry Eagleton states, all oppressed groups share the fact of their being oppressed. Thus, their collective identity is “negative,” defined more by common antagonism than by shared positive characteristics to some political order. However, that negative collective identity is bound over a period of time to generate a positive particular culture, without which political emancipation is probably impossible. Nobody, he continues, can live in perpetual deferment of their sense of selfhood, or free themselves from bondage without a strongly affirmative consciousness of who they are.¹⁵ In other words, the racialized capitalist institutions during the 1930s and 40s in America brought up the negative collective identities both shared and distinguished in multiple ethnic groups, and such self-consciousness eventually incubates “the culture of negativity” against the oppressive system. However, the “negativity” of those oppressed peoples — their sense of themselves as dislocated and depleted—already implies a more positive style of being. That can be called “the formation of new American subjectivity,” which is the dialectical dynamics of American society having operated. In this vision, Americanism and Anti-Americanism are thesis and anti-thesis working together to create a new American subjectivity.

Through the main characters in *East Goes West* and *Native Son*, the two writers illustrate America is not a homogenous entity but a space where different ideas or practices contest each other. They all experience severe alienation and repression from the dominant society, and all of them, wittingly or unwittingly, challenge normative conceptions of America. They all suggest the ideas of new America though they are different from each other in terms of comprehending the social forces at work that necessitate the formation of racial identity.

In chapter one, I argue that Kang’s novel is a critique of modern capitalist society called America. For Kang, present America is a reified society. He criticizes, throughout his novel, severe problems of reified America. As we will see, Kang’s critique of present America as a reified society is valuable in that it reveals a sense of racial antagonism in the United States. Kang’s liberalism, however, prevents him from seeing the causes of racial antagonism, which is rooted in the capitalist institutions, and what is worse, the failure of liberalistic discourse disallows the vision of social improvement, the collective endeavor to achieve the critical consciousness and revolt against the system. His limited criticism of capitalism is based on the memory of romantic feudal pastoral past of East, not on the critical analysis of material foundation of American society.

Indeed, his romantic “East nostalgia” is double-edged: one is negative in that it prevents him from seeing the reality; the other is positive in that his attempt to compensate for this degradation caused by mechanical powers and the mechanical philosophy of his time is done in the name of “organic society” and other Chinese

¹⁴ See Marcial Gonzalez, *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 191-192.

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1988), 44.

classical poets and philosophers, and consequently it is in the service of his salvation from alienation abstractly. As we will see, he criticizes the most apparent features of reification in his day, specialization and rationalization, or the tendency to mechanize man in the service of profit-making enterprises requiring calculation and measurable risks. However, he is so immersed in East paradigm (or philosophy) and romanticism that he cannot have the power to penetrate the immediate, apparent feature of American society. In this context, ironically, Shakespeare is never different from the Classical poets in East Asia though these two look opposite on the level of appearance because they intensify Kang's reified thinking. It is my belief that the reason is because he is arrested within the liberal democratic vision.¹⁶

In the same vein he regards the contradiction in the U.S. society as one-dimensional in that it occurs in the discrepancy between promise of equality and practice of inequality. For him, the racializing function of the state is not inherent to its formation and existence, but is instead an "unfortunate supplemental process" that can be rooted out. If all persons have "equal access to the state," regardless of circumstances, color, and conditions of their birth, true democracy will have been created.¹⁷ However, Kang seems not to understand that the "equal access to the state" is impossible, rather exclusion of some race and culture is necessary when the state seeks to serve capital. Kang is never equipped to see where the institutional discrimination of Asians comes from while he criticizes and laments the situation. Kang's perspective had been built from an individualistic aspiration to "gain personal admission into the existing charmed circle."¹⁸

In the second chapter, I deal with the meaning of America in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, focusing on the notions of 'whiteness' and 'spatial logic.' For Wright, America is above all a place where whiteness is omnipresent. As many scholars have argued, whiteness, as the privileged signifier, always reminds African Americans of the power and control that hangs over them. Power is indicative of a hierarchy-oriented cluster of relations. What determines the discourse of white supremacy is the social construction of whiteness, built upon racial subjugation and exclusion. I will address how whiteness powerfully influences the lives of African Americans by excluding them. Whiteness is entangled with spatial logic, which powerfully influences the lives of African Americans, by excluding them. As David Harvey asserts, capitalism operates by a spatial logic of not only expansion and penetration but also concentration and restriction. The Daltons' wealth is an example of such capitalist logic of space and whiteness. We will see that logic of space ultimately determines the fatal social relationships of the protagonist Bigger Thomas's life and his limited political consciousness.

Richard Wright was 19 when he moved with his family in 1927 from Memphis to Chicago, the city had been acknowledged as a site of great economic possibility and racial refuge for many Southern blacks. In "How Bigger Was Born," a reflective

¹⁶ Refer to Lisa Lowe's criticism of liberalism "Utopia and Modernity: Some Observations from the Border," *Rethinking Marxism*, 13, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 12-14.

¹⁷ David Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 14-15.

¹⁸ Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 44.

commentary on the writing of *Native Son*, Wright describes Chicago as a “fabulous city” in which contradictory elements co-exist in indescribable manners from which the desire, estrangement, and anxiety of Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, are born. For Wright, the city was a symbol of the unifying geography of the modern and a sign of differential, uneven development under capitalism.

In *Native Son*, Chicago's South Side, called the Black Belt, is rendered as a privatized terrain of capital that in turns atomizes consciousness and embodies alienation within the city's delimited geographic boundaries. Migrated blacks, including Wright, are strictly excluded from the dazzling wealth and “sense of power and fulfillment” promised by the city. Racist segregation forces them into the poorest neighborhoods. The social position of African Americans who lived in Chicago during the 1930s was absolutely reflected in the spaces they were confined to because of their institutional segregation from the white's wealth. Wright depicts the racializing effects of capitalism through the production and segregation of space in Chicago, which reinforces the divisive strategies of American capitalism.¹⁹ Also, the Communist Party, especially its white leaders, cannot overcome ‘whiteness,’ as symbolically shown in Max's failure to understand Bigger Thomas. This failure, as we will see, results from his position as tutor, not a translator,²⁰ who can bridge the distance between dialects and overcome whiteness.

¹⁹ See Bill Mullen, “Space and Capital in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Twelve Million Black Voice*,” *Reconstruction* 8, no. 1 (2008).

<http://reconstruction.eserver.org/081/contents081.shtml>.

²⁰ Refer to Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity, Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 219-220. Note: Mignolo gives an example of the Zapatistas to know what a translator is. “Subcommandante Marcos of the Zapatistas was an urban Marxist, who went to the Lacandon Forest in the 1980s with the hope of propagating revolution. In the process of trying to convert the indigenous people into Marxist revolutionaries, Rafael Guillen (later Marcos) by accident came across an indigenous elder and came to realize that his Marxist ideology needed to be infected by Amerindian cosmology, and that Amerindians had their own equivalent of what Marx meant to Rafael himself and the urban socialist intellectuals. In contrast to sixteenth-century missionaries who never doubted that converting people to Christianity was the right thing to do, Marcos have understood that converting them to Marxism was just a reproduction of the same logic of salvation, though with a different content. Therefore, he has become a double translator, on the one hand, of Amerindian discourses to the Mexican nation and the world beyond Mexico, on the other hand, of Marxism to Amerindian intellectuals. In the process of double translation, Marxist epistemology is appropriated by indigenous epistemology, but then transformed and returned. In this process, formerly subaltern indigenous knowledge enters the debate on Marxism and Western epistemology. Unfortunately, the white leaders of the CPUSA failed to be a translator.”

CHAPTER 1

YOUNGHILL KANG'S *EAST GOES WEST*: A CRITIQUE OF REIFIED SOCIETY

Few scholars have paid attention to Kang's treatment of American modern capitalist society in *East Goes West*, despite his rich descriptions and astute criticisms of it. Most scholars have mainly focused on the "racial" aspects of his work. Indeed race, as a fundamental organizing principle of the social relations of the United States, is crucial to Kang's criticism of American society. His book contains numerous allusions to and criticisms of the rampant racial discrimination in the United States. However, most studies of Kang's work limit their attention to the issue of racism and do not properly address the ways in which capital logic has used, modified, and infiltrated racial meanings. If we consider the core of Stuart Hall's argument that race is the "modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced"¹ and also the fact that racism underpins the domination of the capitalist class, the inattention on the part of many scholars to the relationships between class and race needs to be addressed.² Above all, Elaine Kim explores *East Goes West* in terms of broad social context. David Palumbo-Liu draws attention to the ways in which the immigration narrative makes explicit the negotiation of an Asian/American subjectivity within culture, politics and race. Also, Sau-ling Wong deals with *East Goes West* in terms of food pornography.³ We must delve into the

¹ Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," *Black British Cultural Studies*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth. H. Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 55.

² Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Sunyoung Lee, "The Unmaking of an Oriental Yankee," afterword, Younghill Kang, *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee, 3rd Edition* (1997; New York, Kaya Production, 1997); Sau-ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); John Kyhan Lee, "The Notions of "Self" in Korean-American Literature: A Sociological Perspective" (Ph. D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1990); James Wade, "Younghill Kang's Unwritten Third Act," *Korean Journal* 13. no.4 (1973); David Hsin-Fu Wand, "The image of America in Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*," *Portrayal of America in Various Literatures*, eds. Wolodymr T. Zyla, Carl Hammer Hernandez, Jr., and Collmer Frances (Lubbock: Texas Technical University, 1978); Daniel Steven Shiffman, "Claiming Membership: Ethnic Narratives and the American Dream, 1900-45" (Ph. D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994); Supattra Suttilagsana, "Recurrent Themes in Asian American Autobiographical Literature" (Ph. D. diss., Bowling Green State University, 1986).

³ Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 32-43; David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University

relationship between class and race in order to understand what America is in Kang's work. We must delve into the relationship between class and race in order to understand what America is in Kang's work.

In *East Goes West*, Kang's protagonist and alter ego Chungpa Han, experiences then contemporary American urban society and emerges as a trenchant critic of life for immigrants and foreign students from Asia in such cities as Boston, Philadelphia, and especially New York, the capitalist center of the time. For Kang (and Han), America is above all a "reified society" where every relation turns into a "thing," especially in the sense that the relations between different races (and sometimes classes) are almost always fixed and closed. Reification is what happens in every instance of racism, where the objects of prejudice are perceived not as human beings but as things or "types."⁴

It is ironic that Han's initially ardent desire to become part of America does not allow him to ignore reality but eventually enables him to see it more clearly. In other words, if he had not wanted so eagerly to be accepted, he might have been indifferent to a variety of events, as are many of his compatriots who turned their attention to their Korean motherland. Therefore, from the dialectical viewpoint, Han's desire to be an American can be simultaneously anti-American, since he can never enjoy the privilege of 'whiteness.' Rather, he is eternally an Asian excluded because of his race from participating in the mainstream of American life. His choice to be an American is not individual but is collectively and historically determined. However, what should not be overlooked is the fact that his disillusion—"where were all the enchantment and romances, the glorious vision, which I had seen in my dreams of America as a boy?"⁵—does not merely derive from American racism but also from the reification that American capitalist system imposes on him as well. Without grasping the latter dynamic, we cannot fully understand what America means to Kang and his alter ego Han.

In this section, I will explore the social structure⁶ that prevents Han from being accepted as an American despite his consistent wish to be one, by employing the theoretical frame of "reification."⁷ As George Lipsitz argues, race is a cultural

Press, 1999), 117-125; Sau-ling Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 61-62.

⁴ Timothy Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2002), 4.

⁵ Younghill Kang, *East Goes West* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1937), 318.

⁶ See Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 184.

Note: Here, by structure, I mean, following Mario Barrera's definition, the regular patterns of human interaction in the society. Structures can be either formal, in which case they would be considered institutions like government, schools, military, and corporation, or informal as in the class structure. Therefore, as Barrera argues, structure is a broader notion than institution.

⁷ See Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 27 as well as George Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 83- 94. Note: Here I would like to sketch a brief genealogy of reification theory that would serve a framework or point of departure for appreciating Kang's novel. Marx did not fully develop his insights into the

extension of reification into the superstructural realms of politics and culture. Lukacs develops the very theoretical development, which Marx does not. Eugene Lunn indicates Marx and Engels did not engage with the general meaning of commodity fetishism, which was developed into the notion of “reification” by Lukacs later. Lukacs interprets Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism not as a relation specific to the economy but as a form that reticulates through the totality of capitalist society. From commodity fetishism, Lukacs deduced the concept of the alienation of labor. Avoiding a mechanistic model of the cultural superstructure as a simple reflection of the content of the economic base as the contemporary vulgar Marxists did, Lukacs argues that it is reified social form of the capitalist economy that is reproduced in culture. See also Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukacs and Origin of Western Marxism*, 184-185. Note: Lukacs rediscovered Marx’s key to the mysteries of the world and to the revolutionary resolution of its philosophical, cultural, and practical contradictions, “liberated thought” and “brought it into the historical-social process of becoming where it is no longer mere observation, but the most deeply informed expression of that very process itself.” In other words, Lukacs developed Marx’s treatment of commodity fetishism toward an overall social analysis and showed the economic categories to be explicit forms of being, determinations of being. For Lukacs, the world of commodity exchange constitutes a “second nature” of appearances, of the phenomena of reification. (Lukacs used the term “second nature” in a pejorative sense to mean the ahistorical naturalization of capitalist institutions. Martin Jay contends that “German Idealism came to draw heavily on the notion that such a second nature might be fashioned to realize the wholeness which Rousseau had only posited as an unreachable dream.” See Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 43. Note: It is not merely a world of illusions. Though the appearances take on the form of illusion when they appear to be historically unchangeable, as appearances, they are the historically necessary forms of existence in which their likewise historical “inner core,” their essence, is manifest. Also see Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 98; Arato, “Lukacs’s Theory of Reification,” 114-5. Note: Here we can see his insight based on dialectical thinking. This essence is identical to the substratum of the historical action of men in a given social framework, which is the foundation of the “concrete totality” to be synthesized. Lukacs argues that labor becomes a system of objective, independent things that are commodities, whose autonomous laws control and subjugate the workers. On this basis, Lukacs investigates the consequences from both the objective and subjective sides. From the viewpoint of the first, “commodification” means that the creation of a “second nature” of pseudo things. From the latter, it means the estrangement or alienation of human activity and the deactivation of the men who are forced to face and work within this “second nature.”

The reification of the human labor in economic production, in which a “subjective relation between people takes on the character of an objective and autonomous thing,” provides to actors in the cultural realm the basic problems of human experience with which they must grapple, as well as the limits within which their grappling is confined. Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher levels, the structure of reification sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitely into the consciousness of man. (See Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 98; Arato, “Lukacs’ Theory of Reification,” 114-5).

Thus the cultural works of capitalist society become the voluntary endeavor of individuals and institutions to deal with the determinate social conflicts and contradictions defined by reified production. And in the process of offering conceptual solutions for them, the works necessarily reproduce the “forms of these conflicts and contradictions.” Lukacs

sees the attempts by bourgeoisie philosophers and novelists to overcome reification conceptually as ideological, for they conceal the real cause of the problem in the class divisions of capitalist production, whose elimination alone can resolve the subject-object split. But this ideology is the inescapable manifestation of the limits placed upon their thought by the “class position and historical era” of these authors and philosophers. Then what is Lukacs’s alternative thought to solve the problem of the separation of subject and object, which is closely tied with reification?

Lukacs’s effort to solve the problem is capitalized on a distinction of class, between the bourgeois and the proletariat. Here his well-known but controversial formulation derives from. Both bourgeois and proletariat exist in a reified world, but for the bourgeois there is no way out. There is nothing in their class location that is unavoidably a historical perspective, would be suicidal, since it would reveal to them the transitory nature of their own class as opposed to their belief that their status is unchangeable.

Theory of Lukacs tremendously influences Jameson’s notion of reification. Cornel West contends that Jameson is “first and foremost a loyal, though critical, disciple of the Lukacs of *History and Class Consciousness*.” Jameson, West continues to say, “nearly dogmatically” believes that commodification is the primary source of domination in capitalist societies, while reification is the “major historical process against which to understand norms, values, sensibilities, texts, and movements in the modern world.” One of the Jameson’s central questions is “how to be sophisticated Lukacsean Marxist without Lukacs’s nostalgic historicism and highbrow humanism?” (See Cornel West, “Fredric Jameson’s Marxist Hermeneutics,” *Boundary 2* 11.1-2 (1982–83), 177). Among Lukacs’s legacies, the two concepts of reification and totality is especially relevant to Jameson’s project, while in actuality, Jameson dismisses a lot of Lukacsian core notions such as “reflection theory” and proletarian revolution etc. Reification is, for Jameson, one of the most pressing theoretical, philosophical, and political interests like Lukacs. Jameson makes the claim that “those doctrines of reification and commodification which played a secondary role in traditional or classical Marxian heritage are now likely to come into their own and become the dominant instruments of analysis and struggle.” (See Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 212; Sean Homer, *Fredric Jameson: Marxism, Hermeneutics, Postmodernism*, 166) Jameson employs the concept of reification to construe our time - the anesthetization of the commodity process prevails, the surface of life is only experienced immediately, it remains opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and uncomprehended and what lies on the surface is frozen and any attempt to see it from a higher intellectual vantage-point has to be abandoned.” (See Matthew Beaumont, “*News from Nowhere* and the Here and Now: Reification and the Representation of the Present in Utopian Fiction,” *Victorian Studies* 47, no.1 (2004), 38-9). Whereas for Lukacs the term reification is not different from “alienation, rationalization, atomization and deactivization,” Jameson distinguishes between reification and alienation. (See Homer, *Fredric Jameson*, 166). While the first is a “process that affects our cognitive relationship with the social totality,” the latter is a “process that pertains to activity and in particular to work”—dissociating the worker from his labor, his product, his fellow workers and ultimately his very “*species being*” itself. As to Jameson, alienation appears to designate a specific form of reification unlike many other scholars, who hold that “alienation is a broader phenomenon, and reification one of its forms or aspects.” Jameson argues that reification is a “disease of that mapping function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity. The reification of late capitalism- the transformation of human relations into an appearance of relationships between things- renders society opaque: it is the lived source of the mystifications on which ideology is based and by which

phenomenon, but one with sinister structural causes and consequences. Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories, but also through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages for European Americans through a possessive investment in whiteness.⁸ To comprehend the meanings of racism, we need to investigate the structure of American society, as studies of culture without studies of social structure leave us without adequate explanations for racism. In *East Goes West*, Kang does not explicitly exhibit awareness of social structure. His understanding, as manifested in his assertion that racism in the U.S. is just like “caste system” (297), is intriguing but limited.⁹

In my view, the structural obstacles that Han faces as he searches for his “dream America” are racism and reification caused by capitalistic rationalization and calculation. Race is a particular that determines, along with class, the lives of people of color. As Lisa Lowe argues, because in U.S. history “economic exigencies” have been mediated through the legal apparatus that racializes and genders the Asian

domination and explanation are legitimized. (See Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory, Essays 1971-1986* vol 2 (1988), 146). Therefore, further, we can grasp Jameson’s implications that reification is more relevant to an understanding of the current world, where our world shrinks into just the reified things such as luxurious Benz, big housings, and brand-name bags, than it was when Lukacs formulated it in the 1930s. Reification necessarily conceals the class relationships, which is the fundamental structure of the social totality, by undermining the sense of totality in society and fragmenting our perception of the whole world in which we live.

What is unsatisfactory in Jameson’s reification is that he seems to lack some practically revolutionary political project - except his utopian thinking, though, as we saw, it itself has some weaknesses. Regretfully, for Jameson, the critical investigation of reified social forms of late capitalist society seems to a little bit abstract discussion. As a result, his investigation of reification does not reach a necessary moment in radically transformative practice aiming at negation of the reified social life itself. To achieve it, in my view, what we need is a theory of the “vulnerability of domination.” In other words, capital can exist only as the product of transformed labor. This is the key to capital’s weakness. Capitalist society is characterized by a binary antagonism between subject and object, which means that this antagonism exists in the form of multiple antagonisms, heterogeneity of conflict. In actuality, there are countless forms of resistance, a hugely complex world of antagonisms. Jameson’s pessimism, I believe, has much to do with the fact that he does not care about the vulnerability of capitalist system and related with it, a number of resistances all over the world.

⁸ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment of Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 2.

⁹ Kang’s viewpoint of American race relations is limited because it abstracts racial stratification in the United States from its origins and foundation in the evolution of American capitalism. Therefore, racism can be understood as a timeless, natural form of social organization like the Indian caste system. Refer to Oliver Cox in order to understand why the understanding of race in terms of “caste” is wrong. Oliver Cox, *Race: A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). Or refer to Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 186-187.

American/immigrant subject, “class” has cut across and been particularized in the various practices of racial and gender exclusion.¹⁰ The history of the racial formation of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans has always included a “class formation” and a “gender formation” that, mediated through such state apparatuses as the law, articulated a contradiction between capital and racialized, gendered labor.¹¹

At the same time, when Chungpa Han laments that “it costs too much in soul-destroying energy. A store is worse than a factory. The aim is always money, things, sales...never life, never creation of anything. It turns away from life. It makes humanity into just a stuff-handling machine (317),” he is most certainly referring to reification of American society. Reification is a process in which social relations turn into a thing and human experience thus takes on a “thingly” quality. In other words, the effortlessness with which the world as we encounter it, including ourselves and the products of our labor, is transformed into a series of objects that are removed from us and toward which we may feel a sense of reverence, or loss, or revulsion.¹² Unlike previous modes of production like feudalism, in capitalism the product is severed from the producer and even turned against her. This severing of the product from labor is at the core of multiple ruptures in all aspects of life. In capitalism, there is an inversion of the relation between people and things, between subject and object,¹³ an objectification of the subject and a subjectification of object. Things become the subjects of society and people become the objects. As a result, social relations become the relations between things, while human beings are bereft of their sociality, transformed into ‘individuals,’ the necessary complement of commodity exchange, that is, the reification of social relations.¹⁴

In *East Goes West*, two groups of entrepreneurs, the department store of Boshnack Brothers and D.J. Lively, can be read as the location in which human relations are consistently transformed into things. The huge Boshnack Brothers department store demonstrates how the “law of American civilization” runs well. In other words, it is through fragmentation, specialization, and regimentation at the department store through that the capitalist seeks to achieve the maximum of profits and regulate human beings’ their lives and even souls, along with their experiences. Mr. Lively, on the other hand, illustrates the notion of “philanthropic exploitation.” As a manifestation of the Benjamin Franklin spirit, Mr. Lively takes advantage of philanthropy as a way of exploiting others, including Han. It has often been said that philanthropy is a uniquely American expression of generosity and as such is one of the country’s great strengths.¹⁵ However, philanthropy does not derive so much from American people’s generosity as from logic of capitalism, which is concerned with the

¹⁰ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹² Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, xi.

¹³ John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), ch. 4.

¹⁴ George Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 83-95.

¹⁵ Richard Drezen, “Washington Post/New York City Bureau,” *Library Journal*, vol.128. no.12 (July 2003), 98.

maximization of profits. I will illuminate the system of “philanthropic exploitation” by employing Pierre Bourdieu’s thoughts on symbolic capital.¹⁶

Finally, I will engage with the problematic representation of Rev. Bonheurein *East Goes West* as a symptom of Kang’s consciousness of the African American situation and the (primitive) accumulation of capital in the United States. I place Rev. Bonheure in the category of a businessman, rather than simply a “con-artist minister” interested more in money than in the glorification of God or the welfare of his mainly African American followers, as Kang’s alter ego Chung Pa Han and many other critics have described him.

From “Use-value” to “Exchange-value” Society

East Goes West begins with a meditation on time. Kang’s narrator Han draws a sharp line between the Eastern and Western concepts of time, positing that the latter is a reified time based on the clock, a symbol of the “machine age.” The Western concept of time, according to Kang, makes people “illusioned.”¹⁷ Eastern time, on the other hand, is perpetual time, always there, whole. The first scene in the book is important because the meditation on time prefigures Han’s journey to his dream America and its meaning. Though he naively anticipates an America wholeness and totality, he unconsciously raises the question of reification, symbolized as time in the “machine age.”

Nobody can escape from the sphere of “clock” time without giving up living in the West. In the “machine age,” time is analyzed as one of the goods at a person’s disposal and as something that can only be alienated voluntarily and never entirely. As William Booth argues, the production process of the modern mechanized location (that is, a factory), involves the introduction of labor-simplifying and labor-saving technology that so levels workers’ skills that the movements of the clock’s pendulum, marking out its identical passing moments, are an accurate measure of the relative activity of different labor powers.¹⁸ When Karl Marx says that the worker is “personified labor time,” he means that labor power has been so homogenized that its various forms are distinguishable one from the other only by the purely quantitative yardstick of hours expended. He suggests, in short, that time is the measure of the exchange value of labor power.¹⁹

In the Marxian tradition, time is treated in the context of prices and exploitation (that is, the surplus value, or embodied labor time produced by a worker). Time as the measure of the exchange value of labor power renders its varied expressions homogeneous and comparable from the viewpoint of the market.²⁰ Marx

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 112.

¹⁷ Kang, *East Goes West*, 3.

¹⁸ William James Booth, “Economies of Time: On the Idea of Time in Marx’s Political Economy,” *Political Theory*, vol.19, no. 1 (February 1991), 9.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, “The Poverty of Philosophy,” in *Karl Marx: Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 124, 127; quoted in Booth, 9.

²⁰ Booth, “Economies of Time: On the Idea of Time in Marx’s Political Economy,” 8.

writes, “Moments are the elements of profit.”²¹ As William James Booth explains, the centrality of time under capitalism is a major concern. Whereas use values are not measured by their embodied labor time, exchange value is, and labor time is also the substance of value. Surplus value is only the ratio of two sorts of time—necessary and surplus, which is to say the time required for the reproduction of labor and the excess or surplus time expended in production.²²

In pre-capitalist societies, on the contrary, time is not an alienated and fragmented measure, as Han’s recollection of his early life in his homeland shows:

Life in such country districts as mine was a long broken dream, lasting thousands of years, in which the same experiences, the same thoughts, the same life came unceasingly, like the constantly reappearing flowers of Spring, whose forms and attributes were the same, although the individuals were changing. Having turned my cows out to graze, I lay in the grass under a huge-leafed tree with my bare legs fanning the air, reading the fascinating black characters of some ancient book, dating back no hundreds but thousands of years, but *fresh and thrilling* to me.²³

Han’s description of his hometown shows well the “rounded” world of “immediacy” and “poetry.” According to Lukacs,

Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths — ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light.”²⁴

In Han’s hometown, “life grew in manifold harmony, careless, free, simple and primitive. It had its curved lines, its brilliant colors, and its haunting music, its own magic of being.” The place was a “spiritual planet that had been my fathers’ home” and there, “the men, the women, and the children, the plants, fruits, gardens and animals all, traveled together in a forgotten leisure.” They sang “songs, made love and ate heartily” since “there was always time.”²⁵

In contrast, New York is “the world of the machine” and consequently the world of reification, where everything is new and unfamiliar, full of adventure but not their own, a wide and strange place. New York is “mediated” world. Han could not have come farther from home than New York.

²¹ Ibid., 13.

²² Ibid., 13.

²³ Younghill Kang, *The Grass Roof* (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1931), 100-101.

²⁴ George Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans., Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 29.

²⁵ Kang, *East Goes West*, 4. Note: Kang several times hints the destruction of the old “beautiful” time owing to Japanese invasion in his texts, *The Grass Roof* and *East Goes West*.

New York - that magic city on rock yet ungrounded, nervous, flowing, million-hued as a dream, became...the vast mechanical incubator of me ...In unearthly white and mauve, shadow of white, the city rose, like a dream dreamed overnight, new, remorselessly new, impossibly new...and yet there in all the arrogant pride of rejoiced materialism. These young, slim, stately things a thousand houses high...a tower of Babel each one, not one tower of Babel but many, a city of Babel towers, casually, easily strewn end up against the skies.²⁶

New York is the place where people's cherished goals have come to be interpreted in light of profitability, things, and commercial symbols of profitability and things. The towers of Babel that have been constructed by modern technology and desire evokes some fear in Han, but at the same time the fantasy that he might succeed there through opportunities seemingly open to all and not just to a "king nor a ghost." New York can be seen as containing and symbolizing the secrets of liberal capitalist society.

However, for someone like Han, who has neither white privileges nor resources does not have enough resources and the white privilege, such opportunities are elusive. Even so, Han continues to believe that he can win acceptance into mainstream American society. Han seeks success there while also dreaming of an existence not reducible to quantifiable exchange-value. His contradictory search inevitably fails because the social structure of the U.S. does not allow him as a poor racialized Asian to have either.

The noisy and unpredictable machinery of the New York metropolis assaults the subject as an alien force that continuously threatens any vestige of individual autonomy. Han muses, "I became convinced that everyone in New York felt the same way...the need of sustaining a role, a sort of gamin like sophistication, harder and more polished than a diamond."²⁷ Through his depiction of New York, Kang describes the harsh juxtapositions of wounded racialized and exploited subjectivity with the anarchy of commerce, which brings about the dissolution of social community into scattered and unconnected fragments. From the most developed concentration of technological achievement and civilized social organization such as rationalization and efficiency, the alienated and reified character of the modern subject emerges.²⁸

In pre-capitalist societies like Kang's homeland in feudal Korea,²⁹ a use-value economy was dominant, whereas in the capitalist economy like the United States, an

²⁶ Kang, *East Goes West*, 6.

²⁷ Kang, *East Goes West*, 17.

²⁸ Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright, Daemoniac Genius: A Portrait of the Man and a Critical Look at His Work* (New York: Amistad, 1988), 119.

²⁹ Han projects his peaceful childhood in his hometown before Japanese invasion as the figure for a real future possibility. However, the real matter is that he does not seem to recognize the mystic dimensions of the false golden age of childhood because for him, all of problems occurred in his hometown were brought by Japanese invasion, not Korea's feudal class system. Therefore, his world is rooted in Pre-capitalist poetic world. That is the reason he mentions too many poets and poems in his two works. (In fact, here the dynamic of class

exchange-value economy is predominant.³⁰ In big U.S. East Coast cities where reification prevails, Han, his Asian and African American friends, and his spiritual mentor Kim all suffer from loneliness because of racism as a reified form of social structure and poverty as a manifestation of class relations. According to Joseph Gabel, racism is the epitome of reified thinking, characterized as “incoherent” and “ahistorical.”³¹ In the same vein, Bewes argues that racism is an example of “non-dialectical consciousness” adopted as a source of reassurance in the absence of any apparent logical coherence to the world.³² In the following section, I will address the nature of Kang’s America by exploring three specific locations in the novel.

The Boshnack Brothers’ Department Store as a Microcosm of the Capitalist World

The department store of the Boshnack Brothers is a remarkable site, complex and entangled with diverse issues of race, class, and gender. Kang contends that the store is a “microcosm of America” as a capitalist society. There, workers sell their labor power to survive. Labor power, the energies and faculties the worker uses when laboring, becomes a commodity sold in temporal packets to the store owner by the worker. Being a commodity, it has a value, and like any commodity its value is

involves because it is doubtful that Korea before colonialism had been an idyllic place, especially non-aristocratic class).

³⁰ See Booth, “Economies of Time: On the Idea of Time in Marx’s Political Economy,” 10. Note: A use-value economy is that the governing purpose of production is the satisfaction of need, the subsistence needs of the dominant classes and the expanded needs of their masters. What it seeks to produce, beyond the material conditions of its own reproduction, is not more surplus value, but leisure for the master to take part in public life or a life appropriate to a certain status or condition. This was the purpose and result of the exploitation of the labor of others. Marx formulates the economy as C-M-C (C: consumption goods or commodities; M: money). Therefore, a use-value economy can be called “C-M-C type economy.” In this economy whose governing purpose is the production of goods for the satisfaction of need, the notion of embodied labor time as a measure makes no sense; what matters is the utility of the activity or product. The concept of value did not exist in the precapitalist world; there only usefulness could be measure of the amount and nature of economic activity.

³¹ See Joseph Gable, *False Consciousness: An Essay on Reification*, trans. Margaret A. Thompson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975) xx; Quoted in Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, 159-160. Note: Gable persuasively argues, “incoherence is the dominant intellectual characteristic of racist consciousness, the epitome of reified thought. Racist false consciousness considers as ahistorical and natural racial peculiarities of historical origin (such as the keenness of Jews for money, or the partiality of Scots for alcohol, the criminality of the Algerian (Fanon’ example), each of which is explicable as a historical phenomenon which disappears once historical conditions change). Racist ideology meanwhile elevates upon this false consciousness a pseudo-history which, instead of explaining the Jew through history, claims to explain History through the Jew.

³² Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, 155.

determined by the amount of time required to produce it.³³ As a loyal employee of the store, Campbell reasons that “if you didn’t have capital yourself, then work for him who has.” His view is of workers under capitalism. Ironically, far from realizing her own identity as a human being, the worker loses her human dimensions by working and is transformed into a generic abstraction. Every employee “had not a name but a number.”³⁴ The worker is reduced to a mechanized tool. According to Lukacs, the number or cipher, which is a symbol of quantification as a rationalized instrument, is one of the outstanding characteristics in capitalist society.

[The] “quantification of objects, their subordination to abstract mental categories makes its appearance in the life of the worker immediately as a process of abstraction of which he is the victim, and which cuts him off from his labor-power, forcing him to sell it on the market as a commodity, belonging to him. And by selling this, his only commodity, he integrated it (and himself: for his commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialized process that has been rationalized and mechanized, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher.”³⁵

Adorno and Horkheimer also argue that the number, as both a medium of mathematical formalism and the most abstract form of the immediate, is the “canon of the Enlightenment.”

The same equations dominate bourgeois justice and commodity exchange....Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing to abstract quantities. To the Enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion; modern positivism writes it off as literature.³⁶

Under this system, the store workers are like “mechanical part[s] incorporated into a mechanical system.” Kang depicts workers’ situation as having a “thingly quality.” He criticizes the logic of capitalism: “it costs too much in soul-destroying energy....The aim is always money, things, sales...never life, never creation of anything. It turns away from life. It makes humanity into just a stuff-handling machine.”³⁷ For Han, the huge department store demonstrates how well the “law of American civilization” runs. Rationalization, fragmentation, specialization, and regimentation, through which

³³ The amount of time required to produce the commodity is identical with the amount of time required to produce the means of subsistence of the laborer, since a worker’s labor power is produced only if she is produced. See Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton & Company, 1978), 70 - 91.

³⁴ Kang, *East Goes West*, 313.

³⁵ Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 165-166.

³⁶ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (New York: Verso, 1979), 7.

³⁷ Kang, *East Goes West*, 317

the entrepreneur class seeks to maximize profits and regulate human beings' lives, experiences, and even their souls.³⁸

Interestingly, the department store reveals one of the inherent ironies of capitalist society and its reification. The freedom of the serf from personal bondage is the commodification of her labor power, the acquisition by the labor power of a value form. The means by which the worker can move from one master (feudal lord) to another master (capitalist) is by providing her labor power for sale and receiving money as a wage in return, the monetary expression of the value of the labor power.³⁹ The means by which the capitalist takes part in the global exploitation of labor is through the movement of his capital, in the form of money "as a mediation." Value, or money, is inseparable from what liberal theory refers to as freedom- the disarticulation of social relations.⁴⁰ Therefore, by pointing out that the department store's goal is "always money, things, sales," Han mounts a critique of the larger social system.

Working as a clerk in the fake Oriental products section, Han is shocked to learn about the way the store is operated.⁴¹ Workers are supposed to smile to "cover

³⁸ See Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 88. Note: Lukacs argues that with the modern psychological analysis of the work-process (in Taylorism) the racial mechanization extends right into the worker's "soul": "even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialized rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts."

³⁹ See Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974). Note: According to Harry Braverman, in industrial capitalism the "*differentia specifica*" is the buying and selling of labor power."Capitalism is the system in which labor-power becomes the prime commodity. This gives rise to the working class as the group separated from the means of production, free (unlike slaves or serfs) to dispose of their labor power, to sell it to another group--the capitalist--who utilizes it to expand the unit of capital he owns. This labor process involving contracts that deal with the conditions of the sale of labor power needs to be strictly historicized. While the market for labor-power has existed since antiquity, it is only with the rise of industrial capitalism in the 18th century that a substantial class of wage-workers emerged. We need to distinguish between the production of commodities on a class basis and mercantile capitalism founded on the exchange of the surplus products of prior forms of production.

⁴⁰ See Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, 117. Note: Labor, from being a general concept denoting creative activity, becomes defined as work performed as a result of the sale of labor power to the capitalist: a process of labor subject to the direction of the capitalist. Other forms of practical activity come to be seen as "non-work" (as expressed in the distinction commonly made between working and non-working mothers, or in the notion that somebody who is not employed is "out of work"). Where the serf lived by performing a certain type of work, the labor under the capitalist system lives by selling her labor power: the sale of the labor power as a commodity, that is, the mediation of money, introduces a relation of indifference between the worker and the work performed.

⁴¹ See Joseph Appel, *The Business Biography of John Wanamaker, Founder and Builder, America's Merchant Pioneer* (New York: Macmillan, 1930); Ralph M. Hower, *History of Macy's of New York, 1858-1919* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1943); Boris Emmet and John Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Sears, Roebuck and Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950). Note: Another thing Han is surprised at the

their depressed facial expressions as their worn-out “machine” bodies turn around in the aisles of unmoving glass and china sets. “[F]iguring with shaking hands – haste and moving too many heavy things made them so – now over the tally they go, recording 50 cents.” Han can clearly perceive the reality under the appearance.

Cutthroat competition—fighting for pennies within the incentive system and constantly being threatened with dismissal—makes the workplace more unbearable. Chasing after the dumb aisle man to O.K. a charge account, a C.O.D sale... two eyes to look at the customer, two hands to count the change... then to make a sale check, to carry the goods to the packing room, then to run with the legs’ tottering strength after a new customer, for fear of losing that sale to another salesman (there is a half percent commission on that sale), at last the dead-tired body moving from the cloakroom to breathe the air—the street air, the dusty, respectable, stale air of staid Philadelphia.⁴²

Everybody working at the store is worried about how to live, and among so many poorly paid employees, many got caught cheating and are fired. Through the portrayal of the incentive system and the constant threat of dismissal, Kang shows us why labor struggles do not occur at the worksite even though the working conditions are dreadful.

Kang vividly portrays several workers’ experiences in that store that can be seen as an allegory of people’s lives in the United States in general. According to Han, the department store is a “microcosm” of the whole society. After ten years working there, Miss Stein, who is an educated Vassar girl, has “no interest outside her own store place.” Only success in her line absorbed her every thought. Success, for her, has become a reified god. Han also observes the trembling hands of an old woman who wrapped dishes in excelsior from 8 o’clock in the morning to 5:30 in the afternoon for \$14 a week all her life. Her “mindless work” closely resembles operating a machine, her work even surpassing machine operation in sterility and uniformity. And even a machine could not last as long as she has.⁴³

Han is most appalled by what he deems “regimentation” at the store. Every worker at the store has to always move fast, since the aisle manager, floormen, and buyers are always watching. Workers can never go out to eat when they want to but must be assigned a regular lunch hour. “Some went at eleven, others at twelve, still others at one and at two.”⁴⁴ Their bodies are objectified; their human qualities and

store is its strict hierarchal structure from its owner to saleswomen. The hierarchical structure consists of store owner, then departmental heads (buyers), manager...and finally selling staff. Store owners invested a great deal of power in the hands of their buyers. Buyers not only made all of their department's inventory purchases, they also set selling prices, hired their own staff, directed window displays and generally ruled over all departmental issues. Essentially, each buyer managed his department as if it was an independent unit. Kang describes very closely its structure because I believe its hierarchal structure is an example of reification in the sense that the workers from the bottom of the ladder never can go up to its ladder to the top: its structure is “structurally” excludes the mobility.

⁴² Kang, *East Goes West*, 318.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 311-312.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 312.

idiosyncrasies become “mere sources of error” when contrasted with the abstract special laws of function according to rational calculation.⁴⁵ It does not take long for Han to conclude that “life in a department store is horrible for everybody.” In his view, the department store is “worse than a factory,” and life at the store is indeed “American life.” Han’s glorious dream of America has been gradually dissipated: “where were all the enchantment and romances, the glorious vision, which I had seen in my dreams of America as a boy?”⁴⁶

Indeed, the harshness of environment in the department store reflects the transformation of managerial practice at that time. For capitalism as a historical system requires constant inequality, it also requires constant restructuring of economic processes. The behavior of the work force must change without undermining the legitimacy of the system.⁴⁷ In fact, in the U.S. during the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a great deal of attention to national efficiency. Foremost among the proponents of efficiency was the engineer Frederick Taylor, whose seminal publication *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) was one of the most influential treatises on management. At the core of Taylor's thesis was the fundamental belief in efficiency as the key to enhanced profitability. His objective was to advance national efficiency through the elimination of waste.⁴⁸ Also,

⁴⁵ Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 89.

⁴⁶ Kang, *East Goes West*, 312-318.

⁴⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity,” eds. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991), 84.

⁴⁸ Ingrid Jeacle, “Emporium of glamour and sanctum of scientific management: The early twentieth century department store,” *Management Decision*, vol. 42, no. 9 (2004), 1162 – 1177. However, I believe we need dialectical thinking here because a new form of innovation was not only by managerial ability, but also by working class struggle. According to John Holloway, working class struggle has much to do with managerial innovation. He employs the notion of the “class composition” to explicate why management introduces a new form of organization. For him, working class struggle in the period up to the World War I was characterized by the particular place within production of the skilled worker. This gave to the working class movement a specific form of organization, that is, skilled-based trade unionism, and a particular ideology based on the notion of the dignity of labor. The de-composing response by management was the introduction of Taylorism, designed to de-skill the skilled worker and deprive him of control of the labor process. This gives rise in turn to a re-composition of the working class as mass worker, with new forms of struggle, new forms of organization, or the general trade unions, and a new ideology, or the rejection of work. The de-composing response by capital is seen as coming now not at the level of factory management but at the level of the state, with the development of Keynesianism and the Welfare State (or Fordism, as it is often called) as a way of both recognizing the growing strength of labor and at the same time integrating it into the maintenance of order (through social democracy) and into the dynamic of capitalism (through demand management). This gives rise to a socialization of capital, the transformation of society into a ‘social factory’ and the emergence of a new class composition, the ‘social worker.’ The strength of this new composition is expressed in the struggle of the late 1960s and 1970s which go far beyond the factory to contest all aspects of the capital’s management of society. It is the strength of these struggles which forces capital to abandon the Keynesian-Fordist form of management and

Taylorism is related to the division of labor, the structure of control over task performance, and implicit minimum interaction in employment relationships.⁴⁹ Maximized rationalization at the work site increased the fragmentation of social processes into discrete quantifiable units and eventually contributes to the reification of the lifeworld.⁵⁰

In the interests of efficiency, retail business includes “education” of “skilled selling.” Even workers’ emotional exchanges, such as smiles and greetings, are privately negotiated and regulated by the company’s personnel standards and strategy. Therefore, they are subordinated to commercial logic and transformed by it. Through a kind of “educational” process, workers in service industries become alienated from their affective capacities and their emotions are turned into tools for extracting for profit.⁵¹ Selling is the bellwether function of the store. Therefore it is imperative that the retailers or managers introduce “skilled selling” that involved the use of trained salesclerks to increase both the size and the number of sales transactions. The problem of productivity could be addressed by building more intensive sales efforts into the definition of skill, and the problem of consumption could be tackled by requiring the salesperson to appeal to customers’ vanities of class and sex.⁵²

One obstacle to a store’s project of maximum profits through the exploitation of the shop girl’s sex and class is, ironically, the class gap between the shop girl and the customer. The class background of the shopgirl is usually modest. The low pay, long hours, and difficult working conditions, as well as the popular image of the tawdry shopgirl, drove middle-class working women into other kinds of employment, such as clerical work. Working-class saleswomen behaved in ways that were grounded in their own cultural and class backgrounds, which could offend both employers and customers, who sometimes condemned their language and manner of dress.⁵³ Their language was sometimes technically ungrammatical and colloquial. Also, their clothing often conveyed a “powerful class-laden message,” so customers felt disdainful when approached by an employee who was gaudily dressed and bore on her person marks of affluence and fashion that were not deemed appropriate to her apparent class position.⁵⁴ As Elizabeth Wilson argues, the performance that is fashion is one road from the inner to the outer world. The saleswomen used the dress to

develop new forms of attack, that is, neo-liberalism or what Hardt and Negri refer to as “empire.” See Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, 105.

⁴⁹ Craig Littler, “Understanding Taylorism,” *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 2 (June 1978), 185.

⁵⁰ Lukacs appropriates Max Weber’s notion of rationalization-taylorization, the increasing fragmentation of social processes into discrete quantifiable units.

⁵¹ See Rosemary Hennessy, “Identity, Need, And the Making of Revolutionary Love,” *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 203-232.

⁵² Susan Porter Benson, “The Cinderella of Occupations: Managing the Work of Department Store Saleswomen, 1900-1940,” *The Business History Review*, vol. 55, no.1 (Spring 1981), 3.

⁵³ Susan Porter Benson, “The Cinderella of Occupations: Managing the Work of Department Store Saleswomen, 1900-1940.” *The Business History Review*, vol. 55, no.1 (Spring 1981), 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

express and explore their daring aspirations and to make themselves feel confident or crucial, real or imagined.⁵⁵ Though fashion or taste is manipulated in modern capitalism through the exploitation of dream and fantasy, as Vincent Geoghegan contends, the process is complex and non-totalitarian. Bodily display can take issue with the present and suggest another reality.⁵⁶ Fashion can act as a vehicle for fantasy. The phenomenon of “advanced consumerist civilization,” such as the saleswomen’s performance of fashion and overdressing behavior, cannot be simply disregarded as the “product of false consciousness.” As Marcuse argues, products not only manipulate human needs but also respond to, reflect, and stimulate genuine human desires.⁵⁷

Indeed, the social conflict that pervaded relations between saleswomen and customers was just the result of logic of capital: that is to say, setting his sights on an affluent clientele while at the same time eager for the cheap labor of uneducated women, the capitalist created the problem for which he blamed the saleswomen. While managers condemned the saleswomen’s class attitudes out of hand, they found much to exploit in their gender characteristics, for sex was a unifying factor in the store.⁵⁸ Therefore, in the department stores, gendered exploitation has been prevalent.

The gendered prejudice of male managers and male workers is clearly revealed when they frequently note how the girls on \$12 a week made a side-living by prostitution, since it was impossible to live on that in a big city. When the clubroom was filled up, there was a good deal of talk. “Five percent was on business management; 70 percent was on sex; 25 percent was about Rudy Vallee, Gene Tunney, Jack Dempsey, and Babe Ruth.” The main recreation and great hobby is the talk about sex.⁵⁹

While most men are poor struggling family men whose lives are in an inescapable rut, they might have some nostalgic longing to be as free as George Jum seems to be. The easiest way to sneak out of bondage is by way of some illicit sexuality.” The following dialogue among white male workers reveals their prejudice based on gender and race and class.

“Well, how do you find nigger gals, Daugherty?” the fat man would ask Daugherty. And others then would look around, snicker, and come to listen.

“A-aaaaaa! Can’t stand niggers.”

“What! Not even to sleep with?”

“A-aaaaaa! Nauseate me.”

“Why, nigger girls are just as good as any others!”

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*; Quoted in Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism* (London & New York: Methuen & Co., 1987), 6.

⁵⁶ Vincent Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism*, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁸ Benson, “The Cinderella of Occupations: Managing the Work of Department Store Saleswomen, 1900-1940,” 8.

⁵⁹ Kang, *East Goes West*, 309.

“A-aaaaaa! I’d lose my virility.”⁶⁰

In this conversation, white male workers respond to the challenge of the harsh working condition by abandoning morality and human solidarity and reverting to animal-like instincts based on race and gender. The painful awareness of their own objectification in the department store, where women easily become commodified sex objects to be bought and sold on the market, distorts them and leads them to look down upon the Other.⁶¹ Their only consolation in their own commodified existence is to appeal to masochism and racism (“All evening they could make talk like this, seven nights a week” and “here in the escapist mood to which Boshnack Brothers; Men’s club was devoted”).⁶² The alienation of labor is described as a process whereby “what is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.”⁶³ With the extension of the bourgeois commodity economy, calculating reason’s “cold rays, the seed of the new barbarism grows to fruition.”⁶⁴

Reification circumscribes the male workers’ lifeworld capacity to challenge the causes of reification in society or the restriction of social relationship in general.⁶⁵ The total mechanization of activity and the subsequent death of inner life experienced by the subject of modern labor are represented.⁶⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer argue, “Mankind, whose versatility and knowledge become differentiated with the division of labor, is at the same time forced back to anthropologically more primitive stages, for with the technical easing of life the persistence of domination brings about a fixation of the instincts by means of heavier repression.”⁶⁷ Their monotonous life and its consequent racist and sexist dialogue is an expression of the unrest, anxiety, and bewilderment generated by the process of alienation of the individual from society and the reification of the whole cultural process.

At the same time, this tendency of white male workers betrays their implicit desire to project weakness onto the black male subjects who cannot seemingly satisfy or protect black women. But this projection only reveals the white male workers’ own sense of powerlessness under the capitalist system. As Anthony Dawahare argues, black men are infantilized by white society, making American racism conterminous with sexism, since the infantilization of black male symbolically aligns them with “women,” that other figure long associated with weakness and dependency in the patriarchal

⁶⁰ Kang, *East Goes West*, 315-316.

⁶¹ John Walker, “City jungles and expressionist reifications from Brecht to Hammet,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 122-123.

⁶² Kang, *East Goes West*, 316.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁶⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 32.

⁶⁵ Harry Dahms, “Theory in Weberian Marxism: Patterns of Critical Social Theory in Lukacs and Habermas,” *Sociological Theory*, vol. 15, iss. 3 (November 1997), 192.

⁶⁶ John Walker, “City jungles and expressionist reifications from Brecht to Hammet,” 120.

⁶⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 35.

logic of American racism.⁶⁸ They live in “reified identities” in Marcial Gonzalez’s term. Marcial Gonzalez argues that the reification of identity refers to “individuals who have no sense of history and no understanding of how their identities are determined by social relations that extend far beyond immediate experiences,” as well as to “the naturalizing of identities or to notions of self that assume commodity-like characteristics.” To overcome such reified identities, they have to obtain “class consciousness,” which would allow them comprehend the “manner in which history has been repressed in consciousness as well as in the daily practices of social life.”⁶⁹ Political critique is urgently needed at every stage to mediate their immediate reality. In other words, they should engage in political critique of their labor conditions and low wages to transform their circumstances. Instead, unfortunately, they indulge in sexual and racialized talk that alienates gendered and racialized others.⁷⁰

Kang’s position in the subjection of woman as institutionalized through her reduction to an object of economic exchange between men, to the status of a commodity is very obscure and unclear. He seems to exist “outside” the system. His resistance to “money-the first-ism” (as the almighty god) of the United States ultimately betrays the penetrating power of reification, for inherent in his resistance to rationalization and commodification is the “detached” contemplative stance of reified consciousness.

Kang’s critique of the American capitalist system that transforms “life” into a “thing” is one-sided and based on a romantic negation of capitalism. His romantic ideology is deeply influenced by his childhood education in Korea as well as his study of English Romantic poets like Keats and Wordsworth. The shadow of ‘feudal nostalgic’ anti-capitalism falls on his critique. As Vincent Geoghegan argues, “many sections of the population carried within themselves consciousness from earlier times because they were not fully integrated into contemporary society.”⁷¹ Han’s desire to be accepted in America has been frustrated, so he turns his eyes to old time philosophy and English writers and poets, just as his compatriots turn their eyes to their homeland when rejected in U.S. society.⁷²

Kang criticizes the capitalist system in the department store and its various aspects, but he cannot see beyond it. According to Moishe Postone, capitalism is a “historically specific form of social interdependence with an impersonal and seemingly objective character.”

This form of interdependence is effected by historically unique forms of social relations that are constituted by determinate forms of social practice and yet, become quasi-independent of the people engaged in these practices. The result is a new, increasingly abstract form of social

⁶⁸ Anthony Dawahare, “From No Man’s Land to Mother-Land: Emasculation and Nationalism in Richard Wright’s Depression Era Urban Novels,” *African American Review*, vol. 33, no.3 (Autumn 1999), 455.

⁶⁹ Marcial Gonzalez, *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 162.

⁷⁰ Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, 174-175.

⁷¹ Geoghegan, *Utopianism and Marxism*, 92.

⁷² Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 38-39.

domination-one that subjects people to impersonal structural imperatives and constraints that cannot be adequately grasped in terms of concrete domination.⁷³

Postone argues that “the structure of alienated social relations that characterizes capitalism has the form of a ‘quasi-natural antinomy in which the social and historical do not appear.’”

The antinomy is recapitulated as the opposition between positive and romantic forms of thought. Most critical analyses of fetishized thought have concentrated on that strand of the antinomy that hypostasizes the abstract as transhistorical—so-called positive bourgeois thought- and thereby disguises the social and historical character of existing relations.

The other strand is romantic form of thought, which is antibourgeois but hypostasizes “the concrete and thereby remain bound within the antinomy of capitalist social relations.”⁷⁴ Forms of anti-capitalist thought that remain bound within the “immediacy of this antinomy tend to perceive capitalism” only in terms of the manifestations of the abstract dimension of the antinomy.⁷⁵ To Kang, the “causes of all problems” are money and things. The existent concrete dimension is opposed to money as the “natural and human,” which presumably stands outside the specificity of capitalist society.

In the very same vein, even when Kang precisely criticizes “specialization, disciplinarization or professionalization of knowledge” on the grounds that it makes human beings functional beings, he is drawing on romanticism, not on the material substratum of those problems.

I could not help seeing that concentration on one subject makes nobody any real specialist, and minoring by distribution of hours makes no man liberally cultured. Latin and Greek fail to make anybody classical. Neither can the modern language department make one erudite. Sometimes indeed college education seemed to me only a curious convention... the specialty supposed to specialize, the minoring to broaden, the scraps of mathematics, science, and psychology supposed to finish off the rounded man. Aha, there he is! The cap and gown gentleman with a sheepskin under his arm. How suave his functioning mind!...There are many here who specialize in certain things-it is almost the law of this American civilization...like the man who helps to make machines, by working on a particular detail, say, driving a nail. So his life work means that he repeats that single routine work in one narrow channel. He is not a magnanimous creator of that gigantic machine, no, for he has lost the plan of it, he has been absorbed by it, he

⁷³ Moishe Postone, “Critique and Historical Transformation,” *Historical Materialism*, vol.12, no.3 (2004), 53–72.

⁷⁴ Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism,” eds. A. Rabinbach and J. Zipes, *Germans and Jews Since the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986), 5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

is the servant of it, not it of ...how has he any vision to see to the far horizon? He has henceforth no destined goal except to drive that nail.”

Kang comprehends clearly that American higher education is only to produce people with “functional minds,” that the life of the specialist becomes utilized in an ever narrower groove so that he is unable to embrace the whole of life, that modern man is tortured in a “confined prison never to get out,” and that the qualities and abilities of human beings are no longer an organic part of their personalities. But his criticism of the division of labor under capitalism ends up with longing for an anachronistic “organic romanticism.” He emphasizes the transhistoric or transcendental “infinite” as opposed to current reified specialization, and he consistently invokes English romantic poets such as Shelly, Keats, and Wordsworth, as well as the Taoist poets, as models for his society instead of negating the current system through understanding its inherent contradictions.⁷⁶ As a result, he cannot go beyond a description of immediate of problems to a mediated analysis.

D. J. Lively: Mode of Philanthropic Exploitation

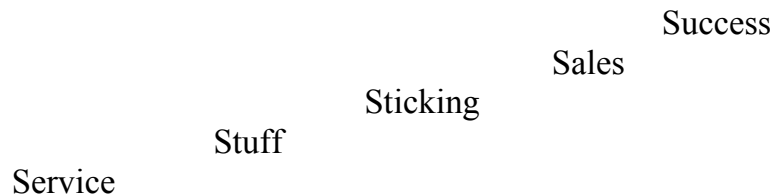
The episode of the Livelys demonstrates an interesting form of exploitation based on white supremacy and its related notions of philanthropy and of a reified mind. When D.J. Lively regards himself as a philanthropist and his business as a “mission” of service for people, we can see some features of the “mode of philanthropic exploitation.” Though he is an American encyclopedia-peddling businessman, Lively and his wife Mrs. Lively, Han suggests a reified American society based on success and middle-class myth. Lively is the incarnation of success, the achievement of the American Dream. For him, everything is fixed in terms of money and success; human beings fall into a “thing.” However, as a businessman, he feels happy and is satisfied with his job and life. For others his life is a good model.⁷⁷ An embodiment of the “Protestant ethic” on his own terms, he firmly believes that the drive toward material gains that is characteristic of capitalist enterprises is not simply about personal greed,

⁷⁶ Kang, *East Goes West*, 304-306. Also, as Wallerstein argues, the need of the modern nation-state for more exact knowledge on which to base its decision had led to the emergence of new categories of knowledge already in the 18th century, but these categories still had uncertain definitions. See also Wallerstein, *Open the Social Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 6. However, the situation became changed in the 19th century. The intellectual history of the 19th Century is marked above all the disciplinarization and professionalization of knowledge by the creation of permanent institutional structures designed both to produce new knowledge and to reproduce the producers of knowledge. The creation of multiple disciplines was premised on the belief that systematic research required skilled concentration on the multiple separate arenas of reality, which was partitioned rationally into distinct groupings of knowledge. Such a rational division promised to be effective. See Wallerstein, *Open the Social Science*, 7.

⁷⁷ According to Lukacs, for the capitalist there is the doubling of personality, the splitting up of man into an element of the movement of commodities and an objective and impotent observer of that movement. Lively’s happiness and satisfaction are based on an illusion, in which effects emanate from himself. This illusion blinds him to the true state of affairs.

but rather about a “calling,” the belief that he is divinely endowed with a life task, a mission, or a field to which he is supposed to devote his best energies.

Lively is a “self-made” businessman, living with his family, wife, and two children in a suburban house. His ladder of success formula in business reminds us of Franklin’s list of Thirteen Virtues⁷⁸ of American optimism and the American Dream:



Lively is good at the discursive production of “morality.” He adheres to Benjamin Franklin’s maxims of industry, faith, perseverance, temperance, independence, and probity. His discourse excludes anything except those values. His view of morality is capitalized on exchange-value. Those incompetent in the market can be discarded as a “non-moral.” Only a “moral man” can be a success, and success can only come to a “moral man.” His friend Mr. Guest is a grand fellow and moral man “because he makes a lot of money with his writing” and “he is well known.”⁷⁹ Here, the form, not the content of success is meaningful. The fact that he is successful is enough to judge him. Whether his writing has quality or not does not matter here. The world surrounding him and his family is so unevenly coordinated that false consciousness is built into his understanding of interpersonal relationships and subjective world. Therefore, his concept of morality is not only formalistic but subjective and violent as well.⁸⁰

Indeed, Lively is based on several influential strands of intellectual thought that dominated the period, which are Social Darwinism, Protestantism connected with science, efficacy of professional self-promotion, and philanthropy. Social Darwinism, or evolutionary theory of Darwinism was reinterpreted in the marketplace, functioned as a justification of capitalist accumulation by arguing that competition was a part of nature and therefore the struggle to acquire money, as a main mediation of capitalist relations, could no longer be considered “immoral.”⁸¹ The “spirit back of the United States” is business mindedness based on competition, and so “Nothing is too small by

⁷⁸ Franklin’s Thirteen Virtues are temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility.

⁷⁹ Kang, *East Goes West*, 152-153.

⁸⁰ According to Habermas, once communicative patterns are exposed to intrinsic misunderstandings, the “lifeworld itself” becomes reified, thus impending modern society’s ability to address issues of meaning explicitly and directly”quoted in Harry Dahms, “Theory in Weberian Marxism: Patterns of Critical Social Theory in Lukacs and Habermas,” *Sociological Theory*, vol. 15, iss. 3 (November 1997), 193. Lively’s use of morality and philanthropy is exactly so.

⁸¹ John Hamer, “Money and the Moral Order in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century American Capitalism,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 3 (July 1998), 141.

which to make honest money.”⁸² However, the essence of “honest money” is ambiguous because it has much to do with other workers’ surplus value.

Not surprisingly, Lively takes advantage of “philanthropy” or “charity” as a method of exploiting Han and other employees. When he offers a sales position to him, Han’s first thought is that Lively is charitable and generous, “as full of good will as ever” and “morally shiny.”⁸³ He considers Lively’s “philanthropy” cosmopolitan:

Such a generous man, his charity shining out to every corner of the earth—even to the interior of Asia - you see it in the good-looking Y.M.C.A. building in Seoul, or in the Educational Institutions in Peking. So many schools and hospitals -all, I thought, coming from the charitable feelings of a man like this.”⁸⁴

Here the expansionist imperialist dimension is totally erased. Mr. Lively says, “Our company lives to give service. Doing good is the secret of how it makes money. We are famed for service to customer, to salesman, to home, church, country throughout this great magnificent United States of America.”⁸⁵

Many American scholars have argued that philanthropy has always been essential to the growth of the United States. Claire Gaudiani argues that philanthropy springs from the “generosity” of American people, which is something uniquely American and is one of the country’s great strengths.⁸⁶ However, philanthropy derives not from American generosity but from the logic of capitalism and profit maximization. Pierre Bourdieu shows how economic capital can be transformed into symbolic capital as an attempt to create a misrecognition so that an interested gift appears to be “disinterested.”⁸⁷ Lively, as a seemingly “philanthropic” entrepreneur, provides Han with a room at his house, good food, and a job. However, at the same time, he tries to exploit Han’s labor. To Lively, Han is unique as an Asian who knows about Shakespeare, a “fine clean Christian young Oriental earning his way through college” (143). Lively tries to commodify him as the “genuine article.”⁸⁸

When Lively offers a sales job to Han, he is filled with excitement and hope for success. He is ignorant of the racial/colonial barriers in American capitalist system. As time goes by, however, Han comes to realize his future will not be as rosy as he hoped. But his skepticism is not based on his awareness that the social structure of the U.S. prevents people of color from ever becoming participants in the mainstream market, but rather on his own immediate personal experience. He becomes vaguely skeptical of his prospects for success when Lively presses him to buy a \$10 Prospectus even before he starts working. Though visiting the Livelys’ house and seeing other employees who might be considered successful give him confidence at

⁸² Kang, *East Goes West*, 142.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁸⁶ Richard Drezen, “Washington Post/New York City Bureau,” *Library Journal* 128. No. 12 (July 2003), 98.

⁸⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 112.

⁸⁸ Kang, *East Goes West*, 143-144.

first, he finally realizes that he is being taken advantage of by Lively, whose words are no more than “sales talk” lacking real human sincerity.

Especially, the real nature of the Livelys’ “philanthropic business” is not revealed they encounter Han’s friend Jum and his white girlfriend, June. Before then, the Livelys and their business seemed neutral and fair to everybody all over the world. Mrs. Lively’s horrified reaction to the interracial couple unmasks the white supremacism under the philanthropy. Jum is confined to his “location” through her racializing gaze. Being “racially marked” is being “defined from outside” and fixed to a particular confined situation. When fixed by the white gaze, Jum’s place (and by extension Han’s)⁸⁹ is inscribed within social location in a way that makes it easy for anyone to know him and his location. Here, we can how the effects of overdetermined specularly on Asian/American subjects rely on “racial epidermal markings being naturalized” differences.⁹⁰ At the same time, Mrs. Lively’s gaze reveals an implicit class hierarchy that designates them as the de-generate “other,” whose actions can be discredited as “not ours.”

Lauren Berlant argues that “white male privilege has been veiled by the rhetoric of the bodiless citizen, the generic ‘person’ whose political identity is a priori precisely because it is, in theory, non-corporal... Unable to approximate the ideal model of bodily abstraction... American women and African-Americans have never had the privilege to suppress the body.”⁹¹ While it is true that the white male is freed from the corporeality that might otherwise impede his insertion into the larger body of national identity, however, where is Mrs. Lively place? Unlike African Americans and Asian Americans, white females like her have the privilege of gazing on others from the position of whiteness. Here, Mrs. Lively functions as a medium of white racial patriarchal domination, not as its negation. She is a typical reified American middle class housewife, a spokesperson for sexual mediation of patriarchal dominance. She internalizes the “common sense” that the white woman is denied to the Asian male because the success of white masculine parochial hegemony and imperialism is contingent on the emasculation of its colonized object.⁹² Han’s ironic and satiric retort that “George is Americanized” and “I wondered where she could have learned so much about him” is very to the point.⁹³

By invoking the stereotypical image of Asians, including Han, as an inappropriate for a white woman, Mr. Lively is revealed as viewing Asians as subhuman, incomplete beings in need of white instruction and help to be civilized. June, his white girlfriend, has descended into immorality, an abomination to white

⁸⁹Han, because he is an Asian, also becomes a potential threat to Whiteness, therefore, he cannot help leaving the house.

⁹⁰ Mikko Juhani Tuhkanen, “A [B]igger’s Place”: Lynching and Specularity in Richard Wright’s “Fire and Cloud” and *Native Son*,” *African American Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 125.

⁹¹ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 110.

⁹² Tim Libretti, “First and Third Worlds in U. S. Literature: Rethinking Carlos Bulosan.” *MELUS*, vol. 23, no. 4, *Theory, Culture and Criticism* (Winter 1998), 152.

⁹³ Kang, *East Goes West*, 160.

female purity. As Lively says, “It is not wise for an Oriental boy to go round with an American girl...you are getting wrong ideas. I don’t want to see you marry an American girl.... It is not as the Lord intended.”⁹⁴

Lively’s image as an honest, conscientious, kind, clean, man who loves children seems to validate the imperial dynamics of whiteness is only a cover-up. The Livelys have no logical reason to think that men of color, including Asian men, should not marry white women. They just insist that it is against God and “nature.”

According to Moishe Postone, modern racism based on biology and “natural origins” is related to the transition of the capitalist mode of accumulation. The rise of racism in the late nineteenth century connected with the transition from liberal to bureaucratic capitalism. Racism does not represent the reemergence of an older form in that it is rooted in the capital fetish.

The turn to biology and the desire for a return to “natural origins,” combined with an affirmation of technology, which appear in many forms in the early twentieth century, should be understood as expressions of the antinomic fetish that gives rise to the notion that concrete is natural, and which increasingly presents the socially “natural” in such a way that it is perceived in biological terms.”⁹⁵

When he meets with Han and other people of color, Lively’s attitude is based on a “positional superiority.”⁹⁶ He takes on the role of a missionary who has to save Han from the corrupt interracial couple.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid., 161.

⁹⁵ Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism," eds. A. Rabinbach and J. Zipes, *Germans and Jews Since the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986), 302-314. <http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/postone1.html>

⁹⁶ If I explicate the reason for “positional superiority” in Lipsitz’s terms, as follows: Desire for slave labor encouraged European settlers in North America to view, first, Native Americans and, later, African Americans as racially inferior people suited “by nature” for the humiliating subordination of involuntary servitude. The long history of the possessive investment in whiteness stems from the fact that all subsequent immigrants to North America have come to an already racialized society. See Lipsitz. *The Possessive Investment of Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, 2. Therefore it is not unusual that all of white people that Kang meets think of themselves as a superior being. Not only the Livelys but also Doctor Donald is the typical example. The Livelys’ racism is not that different from biological racism of Doctor Donald, American visiting professor, who teaches Han English literature and thinks that imperialism is the responsibility and morality of superior people/race who is god-fearing, keen-thinking, liberty-loving, to civilize the inferior ones. “American colonization was the result of English enterprise; the oceanic highway was initiated and made safe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries owing to bold English expansion of commerce; and with Queen Victoria and the industrial revolution, then truly was the Empire most glorious of all, extending far and near” and English literature is the greatest because “it was mirror for a great people, backed by moral sense, expanding over the world in a great empire”(Kang, *East Goes West*,107). For them, racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society whether they are aware of it or not.

Lively always reminds Han how lucky he is to see the inside of a beautiful American middle class home. “It’s a great pity that many Oriental students never had a chance to see American home life before they return. The Americans are models of family life, and you have a lot to learn.” The Livelys consider their life as a model of American life that others should follow. Kang’s ironic strategy subverts the Livelys’ project of appropriating the racialized/colonized subject and shows the reified essence of the society when Han reports their snobbery and reified marriage: “They had Dickens, Scott, Kipling, Stevenson, Mark Twain, Shakespeare, Longfellow—mostly with pages uncut”⁹⁸; “I stepped another rung up the great American ladder of Success when I married Mrs. Lively.”⁹⁹ Like everything else, marriage becomes a thing, which is a “ladder” of success in the capitalist society. The transformation of the commodity relation into a thing of “ghostly objectivity” not only reduces all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities, but also stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man.¹⁰⁰ His qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality but rather things which he can “own” or “dispose of” like various objects of the external world. There is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic “qualities” into play “without their being subjected increasingly to the reifying process.”¹⁰¹

In a similar vein, Kant argues, “Sexual community is the reciprocal use made by one person of the sexual organs and faculties of another... marriage ... is the union of two people of different sexes with a view to the mutual possession of each other’s sexual attributes for the duration of their lives.”¹⁰² The rationalization and calculation seems to penetrate the very depths of human being’s physical and psychic nature.

Above all, Han is appalled by the Livelys’ children. The six-year-old tells Han “how much money he and his sister would have from insurance” when their father dies. The children’s thinking is no doubt shaped by their parents, who think that a real man is a successful young salesman who owns a beautiful home and a “handsome” car and belongs to prominent in clubs (151). As Lukacs contends, as the “capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatally and more definitely into the consciousness of man.”¹⁰³ The “fatal combination” between “residual” religious belief and “dominant” desacralized economic arrangements in everyday life, which is the reason for capitalism’s triumph in American society, ends up with the birth of such a child, who embodies the logic of reification to the bone.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 7; E.L. Demirturk, “Mapping the Terrain of Whiteness: Richard Wright’s *Savage Holiday*,” *MELUS*, vol. 24 (1999), 133.

⁹⁸ Kang, *East Goes West*, 152.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁰⁰ Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 99-100.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 100-101.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁰⁴ Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic And the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 44.

Bonheure: Religious Form of Accumulation of Capital

In *East Goes West*, the most problematic representation is, I argue, of Bonheure because Kang internalizes reified “whiteness ideology” when narrating his story. As many scholars have argued, Kang was thinking of the contemporaneous story of George Baker, otherwise known as Father Divine.¹⁰⁵ Kang’s portrayal of Bonheure is very negative, even in comparison with his depiction of D.J. Lively. To understand Kang’s political unconscious as related to whiteness and reified thinking, we need to look at Father Divine within the context of his times and African American history. At the same time, we should consider Kang’s political position in the context of the readership politics of his times.

Kang depicts his hypocrisy and exploitation of Bonheure’s followers, at the same time implicitly laughing at their ignorance and servility. Bonheure is represented as no more than a “good time” imposter who might “abuse his followers’ trust and need for uplift.” Kang never questions the contemporary mainstream prejudice against African American leaders, but rather accepts it and makes it his own, which causes his work to be full of prejudice within the boundary of whiteness.

White journalists in Father Divine’s times described him as nothing but a con-artist. According to Marie Griffith, when analyzed as a religious leader, Father Divine has most often been seen through the lens of class and race as a cult leader.¹⁰⁶ Especially, his theology of materialization was despised by contemporary journalists, most of whom were of course white. They depicted him as “the squat little Negro messiah with the shiny bald head wearing an absurd mustache” and his followers as “angels throwing themselves into a frenzy wilder than the wildest military camp meetings.”¹⁰⁷ Du Bois argues that the “newspapers specialized in news almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.”¹⁰⁸ In the same vein, Robert Weisbrot argues that Father Divine rejected the otherworldly focus that typified black churches during the Depression. Instead, he fashioned a present-centered, activist religion aimed at racial and social justice on earth. In addition to jobs and free meals, his Peace Mission prompted social change by its interracial membership and racial egalitarianism and by buying property for racially mixed occupancy in white areas.¹⁰⁹ He challenged American racial orthodoxy with his insistence that racially descriptive terms not be employed within his movement. Also the movement became involved in the campaign to save the Scottsboro Boys and supported the struggle for the release of

¹⁰⁵ R.J.C., “Life in America Viewed by Korean,” rev. of *East Goes West*, by Younghill Kang, *Springfield Sunday Union & Republican* 26 (September 1937), 7E.

¹⁰⁶ Marie Griffith, “Body Salvation: New Thought, Father Divine, and the Feast of Material Pleasure,” *Religious and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11, no. 2 (2011), 120.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁰⁸ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 700-701.

¹⁰⁹ Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 110.

Angelo Herndon, a black labor organizer convicted in Georgia on unfair charges of incitement to insurrection.¹¹⁰

Raised in poverty and moved by the suffering of the hungry, Father Divine thought about the body's daily functions, unlike other contemporary religious leaders.¹¹¹ Also, his emphasis on fat—he urged his followers to be fat—might seem absurd and even grotesque to us as well as to his contemporaries. However, we must understand why he did so within the context of his life and history and of African American lives and history in general. Under the regime of slavery, it was almost impossible that African American slaves gained an extraordinary amount of weight because watchful eyes and grueling work set limits on their bodies. For them, corpulence symbolized victory over poverty—“black poverty born of slavery”—and its shame. Fat bodies had “presence.” They could not be ignored, as white masters once hoped to ignore the “fitter” bodies of obedient slaves.¹¹² No doubt many poor, homeless, and hungry people were drawn to Father Divine's Peace Mission because of the food, which was a concrete symbol of heavenly love poured out upon all who were willing to partake of it, provided for them without any discrimination.¹¹³ In a word, Father Divine is a product of the cruel history of African America. His emphasis on ‘material things over here’ foregrounds the history of slavery that is supposed to be suppressed. Why then did Kang, who had access to information about Father Divine, represent Bonheure so negatively? In my view, this has to do both with readership politics and with Kang's limited political consciousness.

From the time when he first meets Bonheure on the street, Han suspects him of being a somewhat untrustworthy person, which is very different from his attitude toward white persons like Mr. Lively and other whites, whom he never suspects at the outset. What does it say to us? Isn't this related to his unconscious? Therefore, when Bonheure gestures to Han to join him, Han does not comply. This, I post, has to do with Bonheure's unique style but his “dark” color. Han's prejudice is clearly revealed throughout the episode: Han judges Bonheure as ignorant because he does not know *Elmer Gantry*, a novel written by Sinclair Lewis. Why should Bonheure know the novel? Kang offers no explanation. It could be that Han just tries to show the reader Bonheure's intellectual inferiority. Also, Bonheure's followers are depicted as ignorant and emotional, and Kang resorts to stereotyping when he describes them as “richer emotionally richer than other people” after seeing “all the Negroes were crying about Ginsburg's conversion” and “crowded around him, tear falling, to shake his hand, to hug him, then to turn and hug one another.” And when Han makes a speech on racial prejudice in front of the congregation, he cites white writers such as Walt Whitman instead of Douglass or Du Bois. This reveals implicitly his internalization of white supremacy.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 110

¹¹¹ Griffith, “Body Salvation: New Thought, Father Divine, and the Feast of Material Pleasure,” 130.

¹¹² Ibid., 134.

¹¹³ Ibid., 128.

¹¹⁴ Kang, *East Goes West*, 366-367.

Questioning Kang's point of view of Bonheure's business, I'd like to consider Bonheure's method of accumulation of wealth as "Religious Form of Accumulation of Capital." Here, some can think of Karl Marx's famous description of religion is the "opiate of the people." However, in my view, Marx's criticism cannot fully be applied to this case because Bonheure does not offer solace for the ills of this world by pointing to a heavenly world after death. Of course, his religion provides an "imaginary solution of a real contradiction." But what I want to argue is that his power lies in its recognition of the concrete material existence of suffering and oppression.

We can see how Bonheure accumulates wealth through his religion. Unlike many white entrepreneurs who can accumulate their wealth over long years, African Americans had little to become businessmen like the Boshnack brothers because of difference in terms of primitive accumulation of capital between whites and blacks. African American accumulation of capital was very different from whites. As Peter Bohmer explains,

...the origins of racism in the United States are directly traced to the European conquest of the Americas, to a rapidly expanding capitalism in Western Europe and what was to become the United States seeking cheap and growing supplies of food, beverages, tobacco, and increasingly, cotton. These needs were met by a system of production in the Americas based on land seized from its inhabitants, American Indians, and the kidnapping, transporting and selling into slavery of millions of Africans. The slave trade created much of the wealth subsequently invested in textile, shipbuilding and other emerging capitalist enterprises in the Northeast United States and Europe.¹¹⁵

As is well known, this is called the "primitive accumulation of capital." By the late 17th century, slavery became the established labor system for the production of these agricultural commodities. African people became enslaved, not because of European aversion to blackness, but because more labor could be coerced from Africans than from either Native Americans (Indians) or European indentured servants. African societies did not have the political and military strength to resist the seizure of its people. The ideology of black inferiority developed as a rationalization or justification for slavery; it was not the cause of slavery.¹¹⁶

Since he takes advantage of religion, Bonheure's religious form of accumulation of wealth does not seem to be very "rational" as opposed to Mr. Boshnack's. His accumulation does not operate within the hidden system of capitalism. Therefore, his accumulation seems to be deviant, which can make him a target. Mr. Boshnack, as a capitalist, does not need himself to be foregrounded, so his behavior is hidden and secret and we cannot know what he does. He is a being of the "non-

¹¹⁵ See Peter Bohmer, "Marxist Theory of Racism and Racial Inequality," in *African American in the U.S. Economy*, eds. Cecilia A. Conrad, John Whitehead, Patrick L. Mason, James Stewart (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 95.

¹¹⁶ See Sylvia Federici, "The Accumulation of Labor and the Degradation of Women: Constructing 'Difference' in the 'Transition to Capitalism'," *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 17-22.

corporeal” an ideal model of bodily abstraction and transcendental being. The system itself runs the store rationally. Therefore one can criticize Bonheure, who is corporeal and visible, but one cannot directly criticize Mr. Boshnack. Two aspects of racism in the United States—the systematic oppression of African Americans and other people of color and the related ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority—have shaped U.S. society from the early 1600s to the present. Therefore, Han sees the Bonheure as a con-artist.¹¹⁷ He lacks a deep understanding of the structure of the United States, which has determined African Americans lives.

In general Kang exhibits a lot of sympathy to African Americans. Even Kun Jong Lee argues that Han is identified with African Americans in America’s labor market, popular imagination, and race riots.¹¹⁸ Throughout *East Goes West*, his self-identification with African Americans derives from his recognition that both African Americans and Asian immigrants are held back by America’s color bar and occupy identical positions at the lowest stratum of American society. When Kang represents Wagstaff, for example, his eye is appropriate and warm. I wonder, though, how deeply Han recognizes the reality of African American situations and how different his idea is from that of mainstream whites. To be empathetic with African Americans, it is necessary for him is to unthink white epistemology and to choose an alternative way of thinking. His self-identification with African Americans should not be based on “immediacy” but on “mediation.” That would enable him to go beyond mainstream ideology.

Even when he portrays Wagstaff, Kang’s stance is contemplative, which prevents Han from reaching the material substratum of racism as other liberals do. After being denied service in a Child’s on Boylston Street, Han understands the difference between Wagstaff and himself. He feels that he is “outside the two shape worlds of color in the American environment. Through Wagstaff, he has his “first introduction to a crystallized caste system, comparable only to India, here in the greatest democratic country of the world.” He adds that the caste system was seemingly “beyond the power of individuals to break through.”¹¹⁹ We see that Kang vaguely discerns of the social structure based on racialized exploitation. Major institutions and social relationships, such as law, political organization, economic relation, cultural life, religion, and residential patterns have been so structured from the beginning by the racial order¹²⁰ that it seems to be almost impossible to transform them. However, Han’s gaze is the condescending gaze of a colonial immigrant observer. When he suggests that Wagstaff leave America for France, which is said to be a good country for the educated blacks, he overlooks the vivid fact that unlike Kim, Wagstaff was born in the United States and should not have to escape to France as a proper alternative.

¹¹⁷ Of course, I do not deny that many preachers had also limited the extent and depth of black organization, which would be necessary to challenge the system of segregation. See Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 100.

¹¹⁸ Kun Jong Lee, "The African-American Presence in Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*," *CLA Journal*, 45 (3) (March 2002), 329-59.

¹¹⁹ Kang, *East Goes West*, 297.

¹²⁰ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 79.

Han cannot see through the ideology of reified whiteness and figure out how whiteness is constructed or how challenging whiteness might influence the meanings of blackness. He is aware of his position in the racial hierarchy above blacks. The fact that he is generally sympathetic with African Americans allows him to recognize a complex range of locations assumed by African Americans. However, this insight is acknowledged in passing and not developed in a systematic way.¹²¹

Timothy Barnet classifies whiteness into categories: as only seeming invisible, objective, and neutral, but actually helping maintain this appearance through reliance on coded discourses of race and maintaining power by presenting itself as unraced individuality as opposed to a racialized subjectivity that is communally and politically interested; as a quality derived from and against those “Others” whom it sets apart as political, anti-individual, and always raced; as fundamentally a relational concept rather than something residing in an individual or group; as not tied essentially to skin color, but nonetheless related in complex and powerful ways to the perceived phenomenon of race in our culture; as maintaining power ultimately by reserving for itself the privilege of recognizing, defining, and denying difference on its own terms and to its own advantage.¹²²

Whiteness, then, is not a fixed and stable, but merely a construction. For example, the presence of Asians provided a means for ‘not-yet-white’ groups, such as the Irish, to reinforce the equation between Americanness and whiteness by shifting the debate about Americanness from the question of nativity to that of race.¹²³ Blacks and Asians helped make the liminal European groups white, an identity that would have been less tenable in their absence.¹²⁴ Despite its constructive essence, whiteness works powerfully, almost materially.

Within the system, virtues for whites can be easily transformed into vices for Blacks. For example, Wagstaff has various experiences and broad knowledge. He is also industrious. However, he is always poor and struggling, confined to working as a porter on trains or playing a cornet in a minstrel show. His jobs are already predestined. As Stuart Hall contends, race is “intrinsic to the manner” in which black working classes are complexly constituted at the levels of the economic, the political, the ideological.¹²⁵ Race is an active structuring principle of the organization of

¹²¹ Susan Koshy, “Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 162.

¹²² Timothy Barnet, “Reading ‘whiteness’ in English Studies,” *College English*, vol. 63, no. 1 (September 2000), 9-13. Note: Valerie Babb also argues that a distinction between white skin and whiteness should be made: The former is the common pigmentation we associate with those we call white, while the latter is more than an appearance, that is to say, it is a system of privileges accorded to those with white skin. See Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 9.

¹²³ Koshy, “Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness,” 165.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 165-166.

¹²⁵ Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth. H. Lindeborg, *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 54.

American society. Han consistently seeks to be accepted as an “American,” but he does not comprehend that the pressure to “affiliate upward and to disaffiliate downward” is generated within a social structure in which the increased mobility of one racial group come at the expense of another.” As a result, in the U.S., it is almost impossible that for an Asian American to be an “American.”

The character Lorenzo, a black cook in the Schmitts’ house, knows how the system works and how he deals with it negatively. Lorenzo is “amazingly good-looking, very large and black with a magnificent physique, and hair not kinked but crinked, rather like a much rippled permanent wave.” He has soft “regular features more broad and massive than a white man’s and unusually thin lips.”¹²⁶ He is “always polite, too polite in fact” and “diffident.” However, on Sunday nights he becomes totally a different person. He becomes “obscene and violent.” One night when he is drunk, he shouts, “Listen to me, you white people down there. You ought to hear me sing Brahms. Lordy! Hear that woman flat. I know that song. Ought to get me down there, white woman. I know how to sing.”¹²⁷ Such attitude of his intimidates Mrs. Smith, who ignores him in her everyday life and only recognizes him as a human being when he is drunk. Ironically, when he is out of himself, he is recognized by white people; otherwise he would be just seen as a cook and “sambolike boy,”¹²⁸ always meek and servile to his master.¹²⁹ Lorenzo’s drinking is like a strategy to be a

¹²⁶ The narrator Han’s depiction of Lorenzo is very negative, which again reveals Han’s limitations to understand African Americans. His portrayal of Lorenzo is typical and hackneyed.

¹²⁷ Kang, *East Goes West*, 286.

¹²⁸ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian American* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 112. Note: In fact, the character of Lorenzo is very similar to “Sambo.” Whites, as a variety of names, have stereotyped blacks for a long time. For example, black females have been called, “Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, matriarch”, and more recently “welfare queen.” For three centuries, they have been thought to pass down to their offspring the traits that mark them as inferior to any white person and the abnormal and immoral lifestyle that dooms the children the life of poverty, delinquency, and despair. Likewise, the myth of Sambo, which has a long and powerful influence on American psyche, has worked as another stereotype to bind black people. To many slave masters who lived in the South of the US during the 19th century, slaves were “childlike, irresponsible, lazy, affectionate, and happy”. These qualities could be expressed as a type of personality, that is to say, the “Sambo.” Sambo character represents the typical stereotype of plantation slave, who was docile but irresponsible, faithful but lazy, lowly but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration with a stammering and awkward manner. Unlike the pervasive belief, however, the slaves were not the Sambo. The black slaves, in spite of their open-faced laughter, seeming compliance, were particularly “evasive.” In the bright of day and out in the open the blacks were well-behaved and cooperative but in the dark, they vented their rage. If the image of Sambo was not the truth of the black slaves, it is needed to examine why and how this arbitrary notion was created.

¹²⁹ According to Robin Kelley, young black male’s a fast-pasted, improvisational language was a strategy to counter the images of the passive stereotype of the stuttering and tonguetied Sambo. Also, in a world where whites commonly addressed them as “boys,” black young males—especially zoot suiters—made a fetish of calling each other “man.” They made built

subject, not an object made by and for white society. For him, drinking is a method to be himself as a human being.

Han tries to understand and sympathize with him. He challenges Mrs. Schmitt's idea that Lorenzo is not truthful, insisting instead that he is "frank" and ready to "show the world then that he stood on his own two feet—but he couldn't stand on them." However, Han cannot understand what drinking and violence mean to Lorenzo. He does see that Lorenzo is not "what he seems" in Richard Wright's and Zora Neale Hurston's terms. According to Wright and Hurston,

Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem.¹³⁰

The negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiesce, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know that he is missing.¹³¹

Han says, "Poor Lorenzo! And he was so nice when he wasn't drunk! Too nice!"¹³² For Lorenzo, drinking is a way to show others that he is a living person. The Schmitts cannot understand him as a human being. For them he is just an object that they can fire anytime. As Edward Said argues when discussing Frantz Fanon, violence is the "synthesis" that overcomes the reification of white man as a subject and black man as object.¹³³

Kang cannot understand Lorenzo's strategy. After all, Lorenzo is not as respectable as the "sober and industrious" Wagstaff. In fact, however, Lorenzo and Wagstaff are two sides of a coin under the dominance of whiteness.

Kang's perspectives on African Americans betrays the penetrating power of reification, for inherent in his resistance to reified whiteness is the detached contemplative stance of reified consciousness.

Could Kang penetrate the immediate and show it to be mediated? The question has still relevance in contemporary multiracial America. As we have seen, Kang realizes the main problems of American society. Through the protagonist Han, we even can grasp Karl Marx's argument that capitalism is an impoverished mode of social organization. For the department store workers, labor power becomes detached from the individual's full range of human needs and potentials.¹³⁴ His criticism of specialization and rationalization is especially appealing and powerful. Kang does not

an identity in which their gendered and racial meanings were inseparable; opposition to racist oppression was mediated through "masculinity."

¹³⁰ Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, 10.

¹³¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1935), 2.

¹³² Kang, *East Goes West*, 287.

¹³³ For Fanon, see Bewes, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, 72, 219-220.

¹³⁴ Rosemary Hennessy, "Identity, Need, and the Making of Revolutionary Love," 215.

deny or obscure the ideological phenomenon of reification and its existence, which destroys human value and humanity itself. However, his dealing with those issues has limitations in the sense that he makes no attempt to advance beyond the level of description. Kang separates the manifestations of reification from the economic base and then makes them independent and permanent by regarding them as the timeless model of human relations in general, to borrow Lukacs' terms.¹³⁵ In a word, he does not exhibit an analytical level of understanding, which might extend beyond the reified mind. He does not face reality directly, but rather tries to escape into a sort of baseless optimism or into a nostalgic romantically pre-capitalist "East."¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, 94- 95.

¹³⁶ Romanticism is a "cultural movement originating at the end of the eighteenth century as a protest against the development of modern capitalist civilization and industrial bourgeois society, when are based on bureaucratic rationality, market reification, the quantification of social life, and the disenchantment of the world". As a worldview in the fullest sense of the term, romanticism emerges in all aspects of cultural life: the arts, literature, religion, politics, social science, historiography, philosophy. The essential characteristic is a critique of modern bourgeois society on the basis of social, cultural, ethic, aesthetic, or precapitalist religious values. Counterposing the purely quantitative values of industrial civilization with the qualitative values of spiritual and moral culture, or the individualist and artificial *Gesellschaft* with the organic and natural *Gemeinschaft*. See Michael Lowy, "Marxism and Romanticism in the Work of Jose Carlos Mariategui," *Latin American Perspective*, iss. 101, vol. 25, no. 4 (July 1998), 76-77.

CHAPTER 2

SPACE OF “WHITENESS”: RICHARD WRIGHT’S *NATIVE SON*

In 1947, Mrs. Leila Rogers gave a testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, claiming that the movie *None But the Lonely Heart*, was gloomy and thus un-American. For her, pessimism was not something compatible with the mainstream American mindset. She felt that America stood out as modern egalitarian country with individual opportunities for a high standard of living, and so people should feel optimistic. Pessimism and gloom, on the other hand, could be seen as uncharacteristic of what it means to be American.¹

There are not many American literary works written that can match the pessimism and gloominess of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Regardless, Wright digs deep to examine what it is to be American. In 1947, casting the backward glance of a new expatriate, Richard Wright states in an interview, "To be American in the United States means to be white, Protestant, and very rich. This excludes almost entirely black people and anyone else who can be easily identified."² In the United States, Wright suggests, something like citizenship is determined through the subject's—more precisely, his or her body's—relation to specular and economy.³ Exclusion of blacks brings feelings of fear, frustration, anger, and hatred and the inarticulateness of both blacks and whites, characteristics that deeply rooted in American history and its structures of racialization. Wright’s protagonist Bigger Thomas, an American anti-hero, is actually the outsider within American society, reflecting the values and dynamics of racialized America and the possibility of a new American identity.

At the end of *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright states: “What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is. If we black folk perish, America will perish.”⁴ In *Native Son*, Wright puts forth a dystopian vision of “quicksand” collapsing with the rest of civilization and “skyscrapers in our cities toppling” through the voice of the defense attorney Boris Max saying that “there are others, millions of others, Negro and white, and that is what makes our future seem a looming image of

¹ Warshaw Levine, “The Gangster As Tragic Hero,” ed. by Lawrence and Middlekauff, Robert, *The National Temper. Readings in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 323-328.

² Richard Wright, "I Feel More at Home in France Than Where I Was Born." 1947. *Conversations with Richard Wright*. ed. Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre. trans. Fabre (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 126.

³ Mikko Juhani Tuhkanen, "A [B]igger's Place": Lynching and Specularity in Richard Wright's "Fire and Cloud" and *Native Son*," *African American Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 125.

⁴ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1992), 240.

violence. The filling resentment and balked longing for some kind of fulfillment and exultation.”⁵

Native Son emerged from the difficult historical context of the early twentieth century in which Wright learned what it meant to be black in America. Faced with the painful legacy of Jim Crow racism, segregation, economic exploitation, and the impossibility of achieving equality, African American men like Bigger and Wright were forced into poverty and even faced death.⁶ In *Native Son*, Richard Wright identifies such elements as the condition of the society around him, and his philosophical and social concerns through some episodes in his life in both Mississippi and Chicago.

Above all, for Wright, through his personal experience and observation as a racialized proletarianized minority, America is the place where whiteness (based on institutional racism) is omnipresent. According to bell hooks, whiteness, coded as a norm for empowerment, is a representation of terror in the black mind as a consequence of the values and attitudes that persist as the legacies of white racism.⁷ David Roediger argues that white workers took refuge in whiteness because they feared being dependent on wage labor and the necessities of capitalist work discipline.⁸ Whiteness, as the privileged signifier, constantly reminds Blacks of power and control. Power means a more-or-less organized, hierarchical, coordinated cluster of relations. Establishing the relationship between margins and center is an arbitrary social formation. The social construction of whiteness determines the discourse of white supremacy because it is built on both exclusion and racial subjugation of blackness. Whiteness powerfully influences the lives of African Americans by excluding them.⁹ Put in this manner, as Demirturk argues, whiteness signifies that which is above and beyond mere skin color.¹⁰ According to George Lipsitz, whiteness “has a cash value,” which explains “advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal education allocated to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations.” Further, Lipsitz argues that “white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity.” Even though this whiteness is a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in

⁵ Richard Wright, *Native Son, 1940. Richard Wright: Early Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1991), 823. Subsequent citations are given in the text.

⁶ Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 120.

⁷ Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 172.

⁸ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999), 13.

⁹ E. L. Demirturk, “The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness: Richard Wright’s Rite of Passage,” *MELUS*, vol. 26, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

biology or anthropology,” whiteness is a “social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity.¹¹ Racism, Lipsitz argues, is a problem of property and a matter of interests as much as attitudes and pigment. Beyond being a personal prejudice, whiteness is a structured advantage that gives whites rewards and gains that are both unfair and unearned and impedes on the fulfillment and capability of employment opportunities, assets, property, and health care for minorities. Lipsitz continues to argue the omnipresence of whiteness and its effect on those who do not fit the typical middle and upper class white mold, including other racial groups as well as lower class whites. Many aspects of politics, the economy, and culture reflect this whiteness and are so deeply embedded that they are unnoticeable. As much as it is a symbol of both riches and comfort, it is also a symbol of an unjust system. It is by nature oppositional, making it a “hostile threatening force.”¹² This logic of whiteness has much to do with logic of space. Before turning to the logic of space revealed in *Native Son*, I will examine Wright’s personal journey from the South to the North in order to better understand *Native Son* in contextual terms.

From Mississippi to Chicago: The Horror and the Glory.¹³

Faced with severe legacy of Jim Crow racism and economic exploitation African Americans like Wright (and Bigger)¹⁴ were forced into poverty and anxiety. Wright was born into a family of poor sharecroppers in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1908,

¹¹ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment of Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), vii.

¹² Teresa de Lauretis; quoted in Demirturk, “The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness: Richard Wright’s Rite of Passage,” 133.

¹³ The working title of *American Hunger*, in which Wright recounts his early Chicago days, was “The Horror and the Glory.”

¹⁴ Kinnamon states that the “general similarities between Wright at the age of twenty and the fictional protagonist of *Native Son* are obvious enough: both are Mississippi-born Negroes who migrated to Chicago; both live with their mother in the worst slums of the Black Belt of that city; both are motivated by fear and hatred; both are rebellious by temperament; both could explode into violence. More specific likenesses were recovered from Wright’s subconscious by Dr. Frederic Wertham, the eminent psychiatrist. When Wright, as a boy of fifteen, worked for a white family named Bibbs in Jackson, Mississippi, his duties included chopping wood, carrying coal, and tending the fire. The pretty young daughter of the family generally was kind to him within the limits of Southern custom, but when, on one occasion, he chanced upon her in her bedroom while she was dressing, “she reprimanded him and told him to knock before entering a room.” The diffident and fearful young Negro handyman, the amiable white girl, the sexually significant situation—these elements, transmuted, found their way into *Native Son*. The name of the wealthy white family for whom Bigger works in the novel, Dalton, may itself bear an unconscious symbolic import. In the Chicago hospital where he worked as an orderly in 1931, Wright learned of Daltonism.” See Keneth Kinnamon “*Native Son*: The Personal, Social, and Political Background,” *Phylon*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1st Qtr., 1969), 66.

the grandson of slaves. As a child, he suffered from hunger and illness in an atmosphere of racist terror. In his autobiographical novel *Black Boy*, he describes a Black sharecropper's life:

Most of the flogging and lynchings occur at harvest time when the fruit hangs heavy and ripe, when the leaves are red and gold, when the nuts fall from the trees, when the earth offers its best. The thought of harvest steals upon us with a sense of inescapable judgment. It is time now to settle accounts with the Lords of the Land, to divide the crops and pay old debts, and we are afraid...And after we have divided the crops we are still entangled as deeply as ever in this hateful web of cotton culture. We are older; our bodies are weaker; our families are larger; our clothes are in rags; we are still in debt; and worst of all, we face another year that holds even less hope than the one we have just endured...When alone, we stand and look out over the green, rolling fields and wonder why it is that living here is so hard, everything seems to whisper of the possibility of happiness, of satisfying experiences; but somehow happiness and satisfaction never come into our lives. The land upon which we live holds a promise but the promise fades with the passing seasons.

Throughout Wright's years in the South, the threat of brutal racist violence and poverty cast a shadow over his life. The memories of terror¹⁵ in the Jim Crow South is graphically animated his fiction and hunger¹⁶ serves as a powerful running metaphor, a literal description of Wright's condition throughout much of his childhood, but they are also a way of describing his own desire to live beyond the boundaries proscribed by segregation.

Naturally young Wright dreamed of going the North, where blacks supposedly found more freedom and less hardship. In his youth, "so many of the ditties, jokes, and conversations among his friends had been about escape to the North." As young boys, they had gone around singing: "I'm going to shake the dust of the South off my feet, and "Lawd, I'd rather be a lamppost in Chicago than the president of

¹⁵ At the age of eight, Wright and his mother lived with his Aunt Maggie and Uncle Hoskins. His uncle Silas Hoskins was a successful store owner, but local whites wanted his store, his land, and his willing subordination to racist authority. One day, his uncle was murdered and the family had to flee town. There was no burial and no question of Maggie claiming any of her husband's assets. Later Bob Greenley, the brother of a classmate, was taken into a car on a country road and shot. Bob worked in a local hotel and was accused of sleeping with a white prostitute. See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 11.

¹⁶ Wright tells the reader that "hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly... Whenever I begged for food now my mother would pour me a cup of tea which would still the clamor in my stomach for a moment or two; but a little later I would feel hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts until they ached." See *Black Boy*, 13-14.

Mississippi.”¹⁷ Especially, *The Chicago Defender*,¹⁸ the most prominent black weekly in America and widely read by blacks in the South, vigorously encouraged black migration to the North. Its news stories contrasting Southern tyranny with Northern freedom. The paper reported, in the North, wages for blacks could be as much as four times higher than wages in the South. The *Defender* also printed job advertisements. Chicago, with its steel mills, stockyards, meatpacking plants, and lumberyards, was the place for unskilled and menial workers.¹⁹ The North symbolized to him “all that [he] had not felt and seen.” Imagining a place “where everything was possible” kept “hope alive” in him.

While many black tenant farmers and sharecroppers submitted to the idea of remaining in the South despite economic hardships, large numbers of blacks saw life in the industrializing North as a movement toward economic autonomy and political liberation. Moreover, with the brutal advent of white mob violence and extralegal lynching at the close of the nineteenth century, blacks were increasingly inclined to equate travel with freedom and to envision flight out of the South as an oppositional act of preserving their humanity.²⁰

In December 1927 Richard Wright, at the age of 19, moved with his family from Memphis to “frightening” big Chicago,²¹ a city that had been acknowledged as a

¹⁷ Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 52.

¹⁸ The *Chicago Defender* was founded by Robert S. Abbott in 1905, and by World War I it was read by African Americans throughout the nation. The newspaper became a champion of African American equality, highlighting racial injustice and calling for equal rights. The *Defender* provided extensive coverage of lynchings, keeping the issue in the forefront of the minds of African Americans. In fact, the *Defender* was one of the two best contemporary sources for chronicling lynchings (the other from NAACP files), and historians still refer to it as a principal source for early twentieth-century African American history.

¹⁹ Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 52-53.

²⁰ Aime Ellis, “Boys in the Hood: Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*,” *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no.1 (Winter 2006), 182.

²¹ It is useful to know the brief migration history of Chicago since in his formation as a writer the city is tremendously crucial. According to Robert Bone, Chicago was a city of migrants from the outset. By 1850, over half of its inhabitants were foreign-born. By 1890, Chicago was a city of a million people, three-quarters of whom were either foreign-born or second-generation. With the outbreak of World War I, military production requirements overrode racial ideologies that had excluded blacks from industry. With the cessation of Southern and Eastern European immigration and the drafting of young white men into the military, Chicago lost a critical supply of industrial workers at a time of intense need. Industrial jobs previously closed to African Americans suddenly became available. At that time, southern blacks were encouraged to come north to take advantage of Chicago's industrial opportunities. Between 1916 and 1920 about 50,000 black southerners migrated from the Deep South to Chicago. The mass migration of southern blacks up the Mississippi Valley to the city of Chicago took place in successive waves. Second only to Harlem in population, the South Side ghetto—known as Bronzeville—constituted by the year 1930 one of the world's largest concentrations of black people. Successive generations of southern migrants passed through much the same ordeal: the transformation of a peasant folk into an industrial proletariat. Their emotional responses, however, differed according to their particular historical circumstances. The crucial event, for example, in the lives of the World

site of great economic possibility and racial refuge for many southern blacks. Wright arrived in the midst of an era of massive migration from the South that saw Chicago's black population increase from 44,103 in 1910 to 109,458 in 1920 to 233,903 in 1930. Many of these blacks left the South not only because they wished to escape the legal apartheid of Jim Crow life but also because it was the yearly onslaught of diminishing agricultural returns caused by drought as well as by the destructive boll weevil in the fields of the Mississippi Delta that effectively galvanized the majority of migrating blacks to embark upon the mass exodus to the North.²²

Wright, however, quickly realized that in spite of his talent and willingness to work hard, it would remain incredibly difficult to find a stable job in Chicago. Having spent his life under the heel of Jim Crow racism, Wright hoped that Chicago would exude an "air of possibility and promise". But the ominous appearance of the city and anxious faces of black people immediately disappointed him. He writes:

My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies. Chicago seemed an unreal city whose mythical houses were built on slabs of black coal wreathed in palls of gray smoke, houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie... Everything seemed makeshift, temporary. I caught an abiding sense of insecurity in the people around me... Wherever my eyes turned they saw stricken, frightened black faces trying vainly to cope with a civilization that they did not

War I generation was the bloody riot that began on a Chicago beach in the summer of 1919. Five days of violence left thirty-eight dead, five-hundred injured, a quarter of a million dollars in property damage, and a thousand people homeless. This trauma of rejection by their white neighbors fostered in the black community a separatist mood whose organizational expression was the Garvey movement. See Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and Chicago renaissance," *Callaloo*, no. 28, Richard Wright: A Special Issue (Summer 1986), 451. Also, according to St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, black and white workers tended to regard each other with suspicion, particularly over unionization, and with few exceptions (notably in meatpacking and garment factories) blacks found themselves generally excluded from the burgeoning labor movement. During the World War I years, housing production dropped. A general shortage of housing in Chicago made finding a home difficult for all Chicagoans, but the migrants were put into the particularly onerous position of moving into the overcrowded and overpriced Black Belt. Attempts to move into adjoining white neighborhoods sparked violent reactions. Whites fought to retain control over their neighborhoods through property owners' associations; house bombings and anti-black violence ensued. See St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Clayton, "The Black Ghetto" from *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993). Despite the riot and a recession in 1924, blacks' fortunes rose in the 1920s. Between 1925 and 1929, black Chicagoans gained unprecedented access to city jobs, expanded their professional class, and won elective office in local and state government. The Great Depression undercut many of these gains. By 1939 blacks constituted 40 percent of relief rolls, and half of all black families relied on some government aid for subsistence.

²²See *Chicago Black Renaissance Literary Movement*, 8;

<http://www.chicagohistoryfair.org/images/stories/pdfs/1-chicagoblackrenaissancereport.pdf>

understand. I felt lonely. I had fled one insecurity and had embraced another.²³

The disappointment was deepened by encounters with segregation caused by the harsh racism of the North. The majority of newly arrived blacks found themselves forced into the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side, or the Chicago Black Belt. Indeed, it was precisely this political context of class hostility and racial violence against newly arrived blacks that prompted Richard Wright to reflect on the personality of this emerging urban black poor. Especially, anxiety and fear were the young migrant's strongest emotion: "What would happen to me here? Would I survive? My expectations were modest. I wanted only a job." Wright's initial anxieties were fully justified. Employed at first as a delivery boy, then a dishwasher, he qualified as a postal clerk. But In 1929, the stock market crash and the ensuing depression rid him of that job and made his employment prospects even grimmer. When the Depression deepened, he was forced to seek relief on the public dole: "As I walked toward the Cook County Bureau of Public Welfare to plead for bread, I knew that I had come to the end of something." While on relief, Wright worked as the lowest of the low: street-cleaner, ditch-digger, hospital orderly. Meanwhile his living arrangements steadily deteriorated. His mother, brother, and aunt, for whose support he was partially responsible, shared with him a series of crowded kitchenette apartments of the sort he would describe in *12 Million Black Voices*. The cramped quarters were filled with bickering and ugliness.²⁴ The crisis could have almost extinguished whatever transitory hopes he may have had in the American Dream if he had not encountered the John Reed Club.

Wright survived the anxiety and fear of Chicago by way of a combination of radical politics and his art. Especially, the John Reed Club²⁵ in Chicago was an outlet

²³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 261-263.

²⁴ Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and Chicago renaissance," 450.

²⁵ See Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episode in American Literary Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 280-281. Note: The John Reed Club was founded in October 1929 by staff members of *The New Masses* magazine to support young leftist, Marxist artists and writers. Originally politically independent, *The New Masses* and the club officially affiliated with the Communist Party in November 1930. In this Club, Wright turned to a proletarian writer who dedicated his writing to portraying the lives and struggles of workers. In 1935, Wright became part of the Illinois Writers Project, funded by the Works Progress Administration. At this time, the Comintern was rising from its Third (or revolutionary) Period, when ultra-leftist policies prevailed, and entering its Popular Front phase, when revolutionary goals were muffled to build a broad coalition against fascism. See also Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and Chicago renaissance," 461. Terrified by the rise of fascism in German, which might have been prevented if Communists had united with Socialists and others in the labor movement in a United Front against fascism, the Communist Party swung further to the Right. The popular front advocated unity not only among groups on the working class left, but also with relatively progressive groups of the capitalist class. In the United States, this meant that the Communist Party became uncritical defenders of Roosevelt and the Democratic Party. It also meant that they sought to win the support of liberals in all areas of work, including the cultural arena. This "right turn" entailed

for his frustration. Recruited by a fellow postal clerk, he joined the Club in the autumn of 1933. It is well known that at first Wright was wary of joining the club, doubting that white members could have a genuine commitment to black equality.²⁶ Yet eventually he attended a meeting. He writes:

I opened [the door] and stepped into the strangest room I had ever seen. Paper and cigarette butts lay on the floor. A few benches ran along the walls, above which were vivid colors depicting figures of workers carrying streaming banners. The mouths of the workers gaped in wild cries; their legs were sprawled over cities.²⁷

In the words of Wright's biographer Hazel Rowley, the John Reed Club eventually became "everything to" him and his "university."²⁸ His case might be an exemplary scene of how a worker becomes a socialist worker with class consciousness as Marx described.²⁹ The "company, association, conversion" from the gatherings in the John Reed Club was life-changing instruction for Wright. There, he was shown copies of the *New Masses*, the national literary magazine associated with the clubs, and of *Left Front*, the Chicago club's own magazine. These impressed him, and were a new kind of writing from anything he had encountered before. Many of these writers had been poor like him, and they wrote about their experiences.³⁰ Wright began to write proletarian verse in the *Left Front* and to share his writing. For the first

the liquidation of the John Reed Clubs, whose very name was redolent of Bolshevism, and their replacement by the less sectarian League of American Writers. (See Michel Fabre, *op. cit.*, 118-19). At this juncture, Wright was caught up in a change of Party line that culminated in the dissolution of *Left Front* and the demise of the John Reed Clubs. Deeply committed to the John Reed Clubs, which he describes as "my first contact with the modern world," Wright opposed these changes forcefully, but to no avail. In the spring of 1935, Wright attended the first American Writer's Congress in New York, at which the League of American Writers was born. Addressing the Congress at its final session, he spoke eloquently of the isolation of the Negro writer, and of his personal salvation through the Chicago John Reed Club. See Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and Chicago renaissance," 461.

²⁶ Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left: Episode in American Literary Communism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 281.

²⁷ Wright, *Black Boy*, 372.

²⁸ Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 80.

²⁹ Marx states, in *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, "When communist workers gather together, their immediate aim is instruction, propaganda, etc. But at the same time they acquire a new need - the need for society- and what appears as a means has become an end. This practical development can be most strikingly observed in the gatherings of French socialist workers. Smoking, eating and drinking, etc., are no longer means of creating links between people. Company, association, conversation, which in its turn has society as its goal, is enough for them. *The brotherhood of man is not just a hollow phrase, it is a reality and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their work-worn figures.*"

³⁰ Langston Hughes and other black writers regularly appeared in the *New Masses*. White writers also wrote about issues of racism and black oppression. Much space was given to the case of the Scottsboro Boys, one in which nine young black men were falsely charged with rape in Jim Crow Alabama. Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 78-80.

time in his life, he found his first sustained friendships with white people, men and women who took his mind and his writing seriously. He was surrounded by writers and artists who collaborated, shared criticisms, and talked passionately about the relationship between art and social change.³¹ He became a staunch supporter of the magazine, serving on the editorial board during the last phase of its existence.³² The writing and sharing brought his life a fundamental change. For Wright, his labor had rarely been of a fulfilling kind. It had always been coerced in one way or another and had been carried on in class-society and thus not as an end in itself but as a means to the power and profit of others. On the contrary, writing creative materials and gathering with the members gave him an “image of non-alienated labor” and vision of political changes and human solidarity even with white people.³³

A few months later, he was elected as the club’s executive secretary joined the Communist Party. By this time he had been won over by the idea that communism was the most effective path to solidarity between black and white workers³⁴ and to seek rights for black people. The Communist Party USA also linked the black struggle for freedom with the aims of the proletarian revolution. Though the communists’ association with the Negro civil rights struggle had begun years earlier, the worldwide economic and social crisis of the Great Depression gave new weight to the need for a vision of society that dissolved the old order built on racial and class differences and oppression. According to one contemporary of Wright, the communists worked harder than any other political party in America to challenge white supremacy. The communists “pushed Blacks into Party work...they nominated Negroes for political office, dramatized the Black man’s problem, risked social ostracism and even physical violence in behalf of Black people. No political party since the Abolitionists challenged American racial hypocrisy so zealously.”³⁵

Logic of Space

During the 1930s, the Communist Party appealed to African Americans to join it in revolutionary struggle. Wright stated, “Here at last in the realm of revolutionary

³¹ “The Revolutionary Legacy of Richard Wright,” in Nucomintern, (March 2011).
<http://nucomintern.blogspot.kr/2011/03/revolutionary-legacy-of-richard-wright.html>

³² Robert Bone, “Richard Wright and Chicago renaissance,” 461.

³³ The “good life consists of activities engaged in for their own sake. The best things are done just for it. People do them simply because they belong to their fulfillment as the kind of animals people are, not out of duty, custom, sentiment, authority, material necessity, social utility or fear of the Almighty.” When people do so, people are realizing a vital capacity of our “species being.” And this in Marx’s view is as much a form of production as planting potatoes. Human solidarity is essential for the purpose of political change; however, in the end, it serves as its own reason.” See Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*, 124.

³⁴ “The Revolutionary Legacy of Richard Wright,” in Nucomintern, (March 2011).
<http://nucomintern.blogspot.kr/2011/03/revolutionary-legacy-of-richard-wright.html>

³⁵ Daniel Aaron, “Richard Wright and the Communist Party,” in *Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives*, ed. Ray and Farnsworth (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1971), 41-42.

expression, was where Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role.”³⁶ “Negro experience” in Chicago that he describes in *Native Son* is obviously coming from his comparative point of view between the “Negro experience in the south” where the mode of production is agricultural and “Negro experience in the massive urban area” where the mode of production is industrial capitalism. That is, Wright expressed his belief that the organized proletariat struggle by black workers would be the key for the liberation of his people. Wright’s attention to the privatized land of capital in Chicago and alienation of black bodies is revealed in the descriptions of the segregation of blacks’ space such as Bigger’s flat, the street and prison. Those spaces naturally divided by cultural, ethnic, economical market choices control and incapacitate Bigger and other blacks. It reminds us the notion of space in contemporary capitalism by David Harvey, who challenges traditional Marxist criticism that ignores the logic of capitalist accumulation by geographical division. He writes:

It is vital to recognize the ways in which geographical reordering and restructuring... spatial strategies and geopolitical elements, uneven geographical development... are vital aspects to the accumulation of capital.³⁷ ... [C]apitalism simultaneously differentiates, sometimes feeding off ancient cultural distinctions, gender relations, ethnic predilections and religious beliefs. It does this not only through the development of explicit bourgeois strategies of divide and control, but also by converting the principle of market choice into a mechanism for group differentiation. The result is the implantation of all manner of class, gender and other social divisions into the geographical landscape of capitalism. Divisions such as those between cities and suburbs, between regions as well as between nations cannot be understood as residuals from some ancient order. They are not automatically swept away. They are actively produced through the differentiating powers of capital accumulation and market structures. Place-bound loyalties proliferate and in some respects strengthen rather than disintegrate through the mechanisms of class struggle as well as through the agency of both capital and labour working for themselves. Class struggle all too easily dissolves into a whole series of geographically fragmented communitarian interests, easily coopted by bourgeois powers.³⁸

The spatial dimensions of Bigger Thomas's life are initially illustrated by showing Bigger’s house at the opening scene. Its significance is emblematic of the journey the protagonist Bigger takes from bondage to independence. We are told the story of Bigger Thomas, an unemployed 19-year-old African American male dropout

³⁶ Wright, *Black Boy*, 318 .

³⁷ Lefebvre remarks that “capitalism has survived in the twentieth century by occupying space, by producing space.” Quoted in David Harvey, “The Geography of Class Power,” *The Socialist Register*, vol. 34 (1998).

³⁸ Harvey, “The Geography of Class Power,” 16.

living with his mother, brother, and sister in a one-room, rat-infested apartment. Bigger and his family are waking up in their small kitchenette when they are attacked by a foot-long rat. In this scene, Bigger wrestles with the rat and smashes it with a frying pan.³⁹ Also, the harsh alarm clock "clang" with which the novel opens—"BRRRRRRRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINNG! " (447)—is transformed into a spotlight, freezing the protagonist in a confined place: "Light flooded the room and revealed a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds"⁴⁰ As Arnold Rampersad argues, the alarm sound is "America's urgent call to awaken from its self-induced slumber about the reality of race relations in the nation."⁴¹ The readers have witnessed the immobility of Bigger's prison-like situation and seen what it is like for four people to live in a single rat-infested room, where breakfast cannot be eaten until the frying pan is first used to kill the large rat. The described kitchenette apartment created when old houses, long since abandoned by Chicago's wealthy whites, were converted into multiple apartments, each installed with small gas stove and a small sink. Subject to the desire of "Bosses of the Building," African American migrants found themselves entangled in the games of price gouging.⁴² In the novel, the white landlord Dalton charges black people more than whites for the same spaces. That is to say, the kitchenette apartment functions as an advance in the technology of real estate exploitation of Blacks in Chicago.⁴³ In *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Wright made the tenement kitchenette the anchoring point of his interpretive thesis regarding the economic transition for Blacks caught up in the Great Migration.⁴⁴ The move from southern sharecropper agrarian economy to northern industrial center was symbolized for Wright as a move from one regime of capitalist administration

³⁹ Also, Isabel Soto pays attention to the significance of the spatial dynamic in the first scene. Isabel Soto, "'White People to Either Side': *Native Son* and the Poetics of Space," *The Black Scholar*, vol. 39, No. 1-2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴¹ Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction to *Native Son*." Reprint (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1993), ix-xxii; Quoted in Carol E. Henderson, "Note from A Native Daughter: The Nature of Black Womanhood in *Native Son*," *Richard Wright's Native Son*, ed. Ana Maria Fraile (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 59.

⁴² Elizabeth Schlabach, "The Dialectics of Placelessness and Boundedness in Richard Wright's and Gwendolyn Brooks's Fictions: Crafting the Chicago Black Renaissance's Literary Landscape," in *The Black Chicago Renaissance*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and John McCluskey JR (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press), 83.

⁴³ Bill Mullen, "Space and Capital in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and 12 Million Black Voice," *Reconstruction* 8. 1. 2008.

⁴⁴ Wright states about the horrible experience of tenement housing, "The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks . . . The kitchenette blights the personalities of our growing children, disorganizes them, blinds them to hope, creates problems whose effects can be traced in the characters of its child victims for years afterward . . . The kitchenette fills our black boys with longing and restlessness, urging them to run off from home, to join together with other restless black boys in gangs, that brutal form of city courage." See Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992).

("Lords of the Land") to another ("Bosses of the Building").⁴⁵ In short, space defines Bigger's existence from the start.

As Bill Mullen notes, the kitchenette apartment is personified as the social relationships that determine African American life under capitalism. The real estate market is as the institutionalization of social violence experienced by black people in a wide range of social locations, from the lynch mob to the courthouse. The kitchenette seems to be a disciplinary space, specifically intended to mark both class and race restriction.⁴⁶ Historically an African American home in literature has symbolized European displacement of their bodies for the purpose of capitalist accumulation, and in *Native Son* the small kitchenette still functions as a symbol of exploitation by white capitalism.

According to Carol Henderson, this space, symbolic of the social promise America bequeaths to Bigger's family, stands as a startling reminder of "black privilege" into the ghetto. She defines black privilege as the "denial or lack" of benefits of "wealth, education, and promise" given the white Americans.⁴⁷ In the space, the reader witnesses the disintegration of parent/child relationship. Bigger harasses his mother and sister Vera, teasing them with the crushed dead body of the rat till Vera faints. His mother's bitter remarks "Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you," and "Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life" illustrate their disintegrating relationship as well. Motherhood cannot escape the influence of the menial value placed on black life in a racialized capitalist society.⁴⁸ Socio-culturally, Bigger has inherited the role of male protector and provider in a household of a single mother and younger siblings who are dependent upon him for their own survival. However, since he is not able to provide for them as needed, he feels impotent.⁴⁹ Bigger "shut their voices out of his mind and hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Mullen, "Space and Capital in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Twelve Million Black Voice*," 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁴⁷ Carol E. Henderson, "Notes from a Native Daughter: The Nature of Black Womanhood in *Native Son*," in *Richard Wright's Native Son*, ed. Ana Maria Fraile (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 59.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁹ Yvonne Robinson Jones, "Sexual Diversity in Richard Wright's Characterization of Bigger Thomas: Homo-socialism, Homo-eroticism, and the Feminine," in *Richard Wright's Native Son*, ed. Ana Maria Fraile (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 45.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Native Son*, 453.

The Ghetto

For Bigger, home is the place that constantly reminds him of his own alienation from the world. To deal with or escape his own racially and economically immobilized circumstances: he shares his emotional conversations with his friends in the black belt, where they create an intimate space, and he tries to escape into a dream world of movies and mass media. Yet when those experiences are not engaged in critical race and class consciousness, they lose their potential as nurturing spaces for young black men.

After quarreling with his mother and sister, Bigger directly goes to a place where he can meet his friends, Gus, G.H and Jack. The place where they meet is a location of black male community that “allows them to purge the psychic pain of urban blight as well as symbolize an intimate space for sharing their dreams, aspirations, and joys.” The place is the location where they combat social alienation in Chicago, and ultimately make sense of a world filled with racial terror.⁵¹ For Bigger and his friends, Chicago’s Black Belt afforded no opportunities to gain access to industrial jobs or vocational training programs. Desperate to fight off hunger and frustration, Bigger’s daily routines consist of raiding newsstands, fruit stands, and apartments and hanging out at the local poolroom. As Aime Ellis argues, the social and physical interaction in the black ghetto that “shape the personality of his friendship with other black males” tells an important story concerning poor urban black male life. For poor urban black males who regularly endure racism, police brutality, unemployment, and scrutiny from within black communities and from their own families, the social and cultural world that they create for themselves on the streets, in poolrooms, and even in the balconies of segregated movie theaters is “a place to commiserate over and recover from the absurdity of living within a culture of terror.”⁵² Indeed, these urban “homosocial spaces” represent sites of black male community that “foster the development of black male identities” against (though largely informed by) an environment of racist repression and negation.⁵³ Likewise, Bigger’s friendship with Gus, G. H., and Jack—from the warm, intimate exchange “on the block” to the violent rituals that build “reputation”—shows a glimpse of “oppositional or rebellious black male cultural practices,” practices that have historically functioned as a means of forging community and sustaining sanity in the midst of chronic disempowerment. Wright depicts a private moment between Bigger and Gus:

⁵¹ Aime J. Ellis, "Boys in the Hood": Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Callaloo*, vol.29, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 183. Also, see Farah Jasmine Griffin's *Who's Set You Flowin'* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 110. Note: Farah Jasmine Griffin points to the construction of urban black male spaces or, as she calls them, “the street culture space of men.” However, her reading emphasizes a troubled world in which “male protagonists give up any hope of dreaming and seek instead to carve out some degree of manhood in a male-defined street culture and its accompanying spaces.”

⁵² Ellis, "Boys in the Hood": Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Callaloo*, vol. 29, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 184-185.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 185.

Bigger took out his pack and gave Gus a cigarette; he lit his and held the match for Gus. They leaned their backs against the red brick wall of a building, smoking, their cigarettes slanting white across their black chins. To the east Bigger saw the sun burning a dappling yellow. In the sky above him a few white clouds drifted. He puffed silently, relaxed, his mind pleasantly vacant of purpose. Every slight movement in the street evoked a casual curiosity in him.

Automatically, his eyes followed each car as it whirred over the smooth black asphalt. A woman came by and he watched the gentle sway of her body until she disappeared into a doorway. He sighed, scratched his chin and mumbled, "Kinda warm today."⁵⁴

Here Bigger is sharing the purposely but peacefully idling moment with Gus leaning against a "red-brick wall" which is an obvious symbol of environment intent upon reducing his life to stasis. He nevertheless has a deeply felt urge to transcend this narrow existence and become part of a fluid world of movement and possibility.⁵⁵ Then, leaning against the wall peacefully and purposelessly, Bigger and his friend see a skywriting airplane spelling out the commercial message: "USE SPEED GASOLINE." After they read the phrase, they experience a quickening of consciousness that leads them to play "white," a game where they imitate "the ways and manners of white folks." In his game, Bigger and Gus assume the identity of the very thing that blocks their motion. Playing the roles of "movers and shakers" like J. P. Morgan or the President of the US or an Army General, Bigger and Gus put forward a political critique where they link the "spoils of capitalism to their plight."⁵⁶

In the imaginary exchange between J. P. Morgan and the President which ends with Bigger declaring that Morgan's presence is required at a cabinet meeting because "the nigger is raising sand all over the country". Bigger ends the game when he asserts, "They don't let us do *nothing*." As Herman Beavers states, the game's conclusion is important because it imagines a "moment when local acts of racial resistance" have grown into a collective form of disobedience requiring government intervention.⁵⁷ Though the seriousness of their condition does not go un-addressed, the scene of the role-playing on the street corner is definitely an empowering event. It provides conceptual shape to the "racist anxieties" motivating the brand of social control exerted over inhabitants of the Black Belt⁵⁸ and gives Bigger and Gus the

⁵⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 458.

⁵⁵ Robert James Butler, "The Function of Violence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 20, no. 1/2 (Spring - Summer 1986), 10.

⁵⁶ Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Richard Wright and the Dynamics of Place in Afro-American Literature," in *New Essays on Native Son*, ed. Kenneth Kinnamon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990), 86.

⁵⁷ Herman Beavers, "Vortical Blues: Turbulence, Disorder, and the Employment of Surplus Meaning in *Native Son*," in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, ed. Ana Maria Fraile (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 103.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

autonomy and license to resist and respond to socioeconomic inequalities in their communities and lives.⁵⁹

However, this kind of bond between racially, economically, and culturally alienated beings, which might make the potential space of black resistance possible, is easily spoiled without more articulate understanding of their social position. Wright's description of the black boys in the South Side briefly but visibly shows how the possibility of black resistance slips into the destructive breakdown of relationship when the internalized fear and hatred toward their own black skin and social position inevitably leak out at the moment of crisis. The brutal violence among the blacks occurs and the possibility of resistance disappears.

In the scene, Bigger decides that after robbing blacks' stores, it is time for him and his friends to rob a white-owned store. His compatriots hesitate owing to the fear of the white law, which does "not give a damn about them" holding up black folks. Nevertheless, Bigger decides to go ahead with the robbery. Bigger says, "What in hell can a man do?" However, knowing that robbing a white man constitutes "trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world be turned loose upon" him and his gang, Bigger hesitates to do the plan. To conceal his own fear, Bigger almost kills Gus when Gus is unwilling to participate in robbing the property (Delicatessen) of Old Blum, a white storeowner. But in fact Bigger just transfers his fear of whites to Gus. "He hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as even he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through the robbery." Bigger and his friends knew that if they succeeded in their attempt in robbing a white than it would mean a "challenge of the white world's rule over them."⁶⁰ But, Bigger was afraid to commit such an act and knew that Gus, too was afraid and to hide his feelings laid all the blame on Gus. Soon they were in conflict with one another. Bigger's violent action made his friends "hate and fear him as much as he hated and feared himself" (31). Bigger acts out his fear by bullying others; when it doesn't work, he grows angry, but the anger is just a way to get rid of his fear.

"Get up! I ain't going to ask you no more!"

Slowly, Gus stood. Bigger held the open blade an inch from Gus's lips.

"Lick it," Bigger said, his body tingling with elation.

Gus's eyes filled with tears.

"Lick it, I said! You think I'm playing?"

Gus looked round the room without moving his head, just rolling his eyes in a mute appeal for help. But no one moved. Bigger's left fist was slowly lifting to strike. Gus's lips moved toward the knife; he stuck out his tongue and touched the blade. Gus's lips quivered and tears streamed down his cheeks.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Jones, "Sexual Diversity in Richard Wright's Characterization of Bigger Thomas: Homosocialism, Homo-eroticism, and the Feminine," 47.

⁶⁰ Wright, *Native Son*, 465.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 481.

Babacar M'Baye justly argues that what causes such Bigger's terrible action has to do with the "impact that violence of whites on blacks during slavery has had in the intraracial relationships between blacks during modern times." In other words, transferring his own "fear of whites on his black neighbors, Bigger internalizes the whites-on-black violence he inherited from history."⁶² Bigger's imitation of the exploitative and ruthless tactics that whites used during slavery time to oppress blacks. Such strategies are visible in the following dialogues.

"If you killed her you'll kill me," she said. "I ain't in this."

"Don't be a fool. I love you."

"You told me you never was going to kill."

"All right. They white folks. They done killed plenty of us"

"That don't make it right."⁶³

In this later scene where Bigger betrays and kills one of his own folks, his own girl friend Bessie, he justifies his murder by comparing it to that of the "white folks." It illustrates that Bigger does not know the full consequence of his violence on blacks. By rationalizing Mary's death as revenge for the genocides whites have perpetrated on blacks, Bigger unconsciously perpetuates the murderous instinct of the white slave owners who committed horrible crimes during slavery. Wright further demonstrates the internalization of the white's perspectives as the self-destructive motivation for blacks in his description of mass media in the novel.

White Popular Culture

DuBois's pivotal concept, double consciousness⁶⁴ articulates the internalized otherness that African Americans feel when they look at themselves. He explains that

⁶² Babacar M'Baye, "Slavery and Africa in *Native Son* and Black Power: A Transnationalist Interpretation," in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, ed. Ana Maria Fraile (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 83. Note: Similarly, Houston Baker depicts Bigger as a character who enacts the manipulative impulse of the white slave traders that tortured Africans and directs it toward his African American girlfriend, Bessie. "It is not black love (or industrial workers' wages) that secures the relationship between Bigger and Bessie as far as the former is concerned; it is stolen capital. He[Bigger] is a murderer and petty thief who uses Bessie as a means of passage." See also Houston Baker Jr., "On Knowing Our Place" in *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. Anthony Appiah, (Amistad: New York, 1993), 200-225.

⁶³ Wright, *Native Son*, 611.

⁶⁴ In his groundbreaking book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois argues "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark

African Americans are forced to view themselves from the negative perspectives of the outside society. The black ghetto which is completely segregated from the white's wealth but besieged by the dominant white culture makes the black boys see themselves from the white gaze, which is not "true-self consciousness" but false. In Bigger's case, he couldn't help internalizing this view while he had strong desire of escaping the reality. To show how Bigger builds his false consciousness, Wright depicts Bigger and other black boys "depending on popular media such as movies, magazines, newspapers and detective stories catering precisely to the wish for fantasy rather than reality. Bigger longs for "a stimulus powerful enough to focus his attention and drain off his energies."⁶⁵

What the popular media offer him is precisely that for which he longs, the illusion of integration and erasure of world and self. Thus leaving his family's apartment, restless and dissatisfied even with his imminent job interview at the Dalton home, Bigger aches "to see a movie; his senses hungered for it. In a movie he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open." Such movies provide Bigger with a dream, a diversion, itself powerful enough to delude him temporarily. Though Bigger may believe the movie represents the removal of the barrier separating the blacks from the outside world, it represents instead the act of trading in his dreams for those produced by the cultural capital of Hollywood.⁶⁶

In the unexpurgated edition of *Native Son*,⁶⁷ Bigger and his friend Jack watch a newsreel before the main feature that shows a group of daughters of the Eastern elite, including the daughter of Bigger's later employer Henry Dalton, basking in bathing suits on a beach in Florida. Dubbed over the images of "smiling, dark-haired white girls lolling on the gleaming sands," the voice of the commentator introduces the women as "the daughters of the rich . . . a collection of debutantes [which] represents over four billion dollars of America's wealth and over fifty of America's leading families." Attracted to the images of wealth and leisure, Bigger and Jack watch as the camera shifts to the smiling Mary Dalton, her waist encircled by the arms of her boyfriend.⁶⁸

The power of the media culture in this work is a recurring point emphasized by Wright, using illusion to obscure the social contradictions of racist, capitalist society.

body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. . . The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self." See "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C McClurg & Co, 1903), 2-3.

⁶⁵ On mass media see Damon Marcel DeCoste, "To blot it all out: the politics of realism in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Style*, vol. 32, no.1 (Spring 1998), 127-147.

⁶⁶ Beavers, "Vortical Blues: Turbulence, Disorder, and the Employment of Surplus Meaning in *Native Son*," 106.

⁶⁷ The new edition restores the work as Wright intended it to be published. Wright's original movie scene takes up several pages. (The controversial linking of race and sex in the scene had prompted Wright's editors to suggest, at the request of the Book-of-the-Month Club, that he remove the scene and change it with one less provocative. See Vincent Perez, "Movies, Marxism, and Jim Crow: *Richard Wright's Cultural Criticism*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 155-6.

⁶⁸ Wright, *Native Son*, 473-475.

Laced with false hopes, the media presents Bigger with a lifestyle seemingly in reach. In the pursuit of this tantalizing life, Bigger does not hold onto his own true interests, as they are obfuscated, supplanted. Wright further augments this notion by describing the hope to work as Dalton's chauffeur that Bigger feels. It is recalled in the theater how once Bigger "remembered hearing somebody tell a story about a Negro chauffeur who had married a rich white girl and the girl's family had shipped the couple out of the country and had supplied them with money."⁶⁹ Following this, it occurs to him that "going to work for the Daltons was something big. Maybe Mr. Dalton was a millionaire. Maybe he had a daughter who was a hot kind of girl; maybe she spent lots of money." Bigger supposes that working for the Daltons and aligning himself with a white family might grant him the "access of whites' ability to accumulate capital."⁷⁰ The upcoming job becomes more attractive to Bigger under this supposition. Going further, with this fantasy in mind, the chaos and risk of the proposed Blum's store robbery seems unappealing.⁷¹

In this portion of the narrative, readers are meant to see the importance of media, popular culture as the active, shaping forces in social attitudes, by seeing Bigger using the images of wealthy whites on screen to understand the Daltons. Immediately following this is a scene of black men dancing in the jungle following the image of the savage. Bigger responds to this by, in his mind, picturing a cocktail party with the wealthy, and white. The juxtaposition of these contrasting points help the reader understand how media have influenced Bigger's perceptions, echoing, reinforcing status quo manipulations.

He 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. Those were smart people: they knew how to get hold of money, millions of it. Maybe if he were working for them something would happen and he would get some of it. He would see just how they did it. Sure, it was all a game and white people knew how to play it. And rich white people were not so hard on Negroes: it was the poor whites who hated Negroes. They hated Negroes because they didn't have their share of the money. His mother had always told him that rich white people liked Negroes better than they did poor whites. He felt that if he were a poor white and did not get his share of the money, then he would deserve to be kicked. Poor white

⁶⁹ Ibid., 476.

⁷⁰ Beavers, "Vortical Blues: Turbulence, Disorder, and the Employment of Surplus Meaning in Native Son," 107.

⁷¹ Bigger, after seeing the newsreel about Mary, decides that he might find more to like about the job than he initially suspects. There Bigger reaches the conclusion that the job of robbing Blum's store, with its high level of risk, represents turbulence that should be evaded since it contains far too many variables to run smoothly.

people were stupid. It was the rich white people who were smart and knew how to treat people.⁷²

The presented options of the silver screen both cover over the injustice of Bigger's reality and also enamor him to strive toward the power and privilege of his oppressors.⁷³ At the same time, Bigger romanticizes the economic mobility embodied in the wealth of white people, which comes from a misplaced reliance of the success stories of other people.⁷⁴ In these escapist visits Bigger sees "the daughters of the rich taking sun baths in the sands of Florida," according to a commentator, the sight of which, "represents over four billion dollars of America's wealth."⁷⁵ Lacking access to other means for cultural and educational activities, mass media was the most readily reached source for the black youth. Bigger's education is derived from popular culture and media, a product of the white majority, whilst Wright's own came from the John Reed Club, where he learned about the realities.

The media culture writings of the 1920s and 1930s, as outlined by Vincent Perez, denote the experiences of US consumers, thinkers and artists. In these years there was a surge in the mass media up to the scope of traditional social institutions.⁷⁶ The exponential expansion of media consumption raised concern with critics of the day on the possible effects. In 1922, over 40 million Americans bought tickets to the movies; seven years later, when Wright was twenty-one, over 100 million people purchased tickets.⁷⁷ Hollywood had a reach into all levels of society, to all people. The influence of movies in the U.S. transcended all class, racial, and cultural boundaries. Arriving first in the 1920s in urban centers, eventually even smaller cities began to have theaters.⁷⁸ At the time of the depression, the popularity of the theater

⁷² Wright, *Native Son*, 476.

⁷³ DeCoste, "To blot it all out: the politics of realism in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 105-110. Note: Unlike DeCoste, Vincent Perez considers they have their racial consciousness, which mediates Bigger and Jack's reading of the newsreel inasmuch as they are cognizant of the limitations placed on Blacks under Jim Crow. During the newsreel, when Jack tells Bigger how much he would like to be on the beach with the debutantes, Bigger puts a quick end to the fantasy. He soberly tells his friend, with self-deprecating humor, "You can . . . But you'd be hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas." See Vincent Perez, "Movies, Marxism, and Jim Crow: *Richard Wright's Cultural Criticism*," 143-166.

⁷⁴ Carol E. Henderson, "Notes from a Native Daughter: The Nature of Black Womanhood in *Native Son*," 63.

⁷⁵ Wright, *Native Son*, 474.

⁷⁶ Vincent Perez, "Movies, Marxism, and Jim Crow: *Richard Wright's Cultural Criticism*," 150. Note: The Frankfurt School critics believed that media culture in the West had "surpassed the church and challenged the family and the state . . . as the most influential socializing forces."

⁷⁷ Donald McQuade, "Intellectual Life and Public Discourse," *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 727.

⁷⁸ See Vincent Perez, "Movies, Marxism, and Jim Crow: *Richard Wright's Cultural Criticism*," 150-152. "Though initially an urban phenomenon, by the 1920s, it was not uncommon for a town with a population of 10,000 to have a movie theater that held a quarter

began to soar even more wildly. The events of the 1930s leading up to World War II further alerted the citizens of the US of the power of media's power over discourse and opinion at home and abroad.⁷⁹

Judging from Bigger's situation, it is no surprise that he is immersed in false consciousness,⁸⁰ or thinking and forming opinions contradictory to an ideological reality. False consciousness is normalized by the system and generally accepted by the masses or citizens. The exploited individual operating under a false consciousness cannot see how he is being exploited because the ruling class has the influence, power, and ability to create the media and constituent imagery that makes any exploitation seem to be a natural fact. Lenin argues that "as more and more people could be shown that what they had come to believe was a natural evolution of socio-economics was actually being manipulated by the ruling classes precisely to keep them oppressed and unaware that a revolutionary fervor could be inculcated among the masses." As Wright, paraphrasing Lenin, wrote in 1938, "oppressed minorities often reflect the techniques of the bourgeoisie more brilliantly than some sections of the bourgeoisie themselves. The psychological importance of this becomes meaningful when it is recalled that oppressed minorities . . . strive to assimilate the virtues of the bourgeoisie in the assumption that by doing so they can lift themselves into a higher social sphere."⁸¹ Bigger is alienated from the black leaders of the South Side who hold their positions through "accommodation with the white power structure" and from the white power

or a third of the population since it was expected that everyone in the community would go at least once a week."

⁷⁹ See Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 5. Note: While media culture created fear about the commercialization of culture at home, it was, as Dominic Strinati argues, "equally central to concerns about the potential it conferred upon political regimes (particularly but not exclusively fascist ones) for mass propaganda." The growth of "highly efficient means of reaching large numbers of people within societies with centralized, totalitarian political systems was seen by many as another way, along with coercion, of further entrenching such systems and suppressing democratic alternatives." The Frankfurt School critique of media culture has been traced to this specific socio-historical context; it emerged as a response to the advent of fascism in Germany and particularly the Nazis' exploitation of the mass media to inculcate the official ideology through propaganda. "The absence or elimination in Nazi Germany of political organizations which could resist the government added to the efficiency of this deterministic media equation." For many Frankfurt School critics, "mass media equalled mass propaganda equalled mass repression."

⁸⁰ False consciousness has developed from the followers and practitioners of Marx's theories of class struggle. The term has been developed to refer to the situation that the exploited worker cannot see the way he is being exploited because the ruling class controls the social system and creates a false illusion among the worker that the situation was a natural fact. Hegemony is similar to false consciousness in that it still accepts the idea that class domination occurs through the engineering of a false belief system by the ruling class through culture and institutions. It is an example of domination through consensus.

⁸¹ Richard Wright, *Richard Wright Reader*, eds. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 38.

structure itself, whether in more corrupt and hostile form represented by Attorney Buckley or in more benign form as represented by the Daltons.⁸²

The narrative of mass culture creating and reinforcing false consciousness of race and class is intersected by the narrative dealing with the politically radical, especially communists. The ruling class Wright reveals in the novel is both white and bourgeois, and the oppressed minorities are both colored and proletarian. Wright fully understands the racialization and exploitation of blacks have been solely for the economic benefit of white society. Thus, while the strategies of mass media that demonize blacks and communists are logically identical and contradictory to his own social position, Bigger accepts the ruling class' ideology through popular culture. He hates communists, and even tries to use the prejudice on communists for his benefit.

[T]he commentator's voice ran on: *Shortly after a scene like this, shocked Mama and Papa Dalton summoned Mary home by wire from her winter vacation and denounced her Communist friend.*

"Say, Jack?"

"Hunh?"

"What's a Communist?"

"Damn if I know. It's a race of people who live in Russia, ain't it?..."

"Rich people don't like Communists."⁸³

.....

[Bigger] remembered seeing many cartoons of Communists in newspapers and always they had flaming torches in their hands and wore beards and were trying to commit murder or set things on fire. People who acted that way were crazy. All he could recall having heard about Communists was associated in his mind with darkness, old houses, people speaking in whispers, and trade unions on strike. And this something like it.

Through newspaper caricatures and exaggerations, Bigger develops a view of communists as being crazy. His understanding of communists has been formed through consumption of biased mass media. In addition, Bigger's main issue with communists is their marginal status in society. What repels Bigger is their manifest lack of identification with that world he himself holds dear. Communists "didn't have any money. He felt that it was all right for a man to go to jail for robbery, but to go to jail for fooling around with Reds was bunk."⁸⁴

In this respect, it is noteworthy that Bigger creates the fictitious "Red" as a decoy in his effort to evade the law after Mary's murder. In order to deflect attention from himself, Bigger invokes an alternate symbol of prejudice and fear. Ira Wells claims that by charging "Red," Wright invokes the national hysteria that is not an intuitive association for Bigger. In this time period, red functions symbolically as "the

⁸² James Smethurst, "Invented by Horror: The Gothic and African American Ideology in *Native Son*," *African American Review*, 35 (Spring 2001), 35.

⁸³ Wright, *Native Son*, 475.

⁸⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 505-506.

color of revolution,” which is a corrupt and immoral act according to the ideology of the right in that it directly threatens other people’s private property by violence and robbery. There was even a point when the color red was prohibited in Chicago. Similarly, the use of red ink in public flyers and adverts was illicit following the Haymarket Affair of 1885. Wells argues that by having Bigger sign his crime “Red,” Wright not only calls to mind the racial violence of 1919 but also the leftist groups that brought about the “red scares” of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁸⁵

Through *Native Son* Wright exposes the formative role of the press in disseminating racist stereotypes. For Wright, newspapers function as a mechanism through which the pathological fears of white America are distributed as if they were legitimate journalism. In the coverage of the Dalton murder, a reporter constructs the story’s angle: “Say, I’m slanting this to the primitive Negro who doesn’t want to be disturbed by white civilization.” By depicting Bigger as a “Negro rapist and murderer,” the *Chicago Tribune* further propagates contemporary stereotypes. The paper writes:

Bigger Thomas, Negro sex-slayer, fainted dramatically this morning at the inquest of Mary Dalton, millionaire Chicago heiress. . . . “He looks exactly like an ape!” exclaimed a terrified young white girl who watched the black slayer being loaded onto a stretcher after he had fainted. Though the Negro killer’s body does not seem compactly built, he gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength. He is about five feet, nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast. His arms are long, hanging in a dangling fashion to his knees. It is easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex passion, overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her, beheaded her, then stuffed her body into a roaring furnace to destroy the evidence of his crime. His shoulders are huge, muscular, and he keeps them hunched, as if about to spring upon you at any moment. He looks at the world with a strange, sullen, fixed-from-under stare, as though defying all efforts of compassion.

All in all, he seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization. In speech and manner he lacks the charm of the average, harmless, genial, grinning southern darky so beloved by the American people. The moment the killer made his appearance at the inquest, there were shouts of “Lynch ‘im! Kill ‘im!” But the brutish Negro seemed indifferent to his fate, as though inquests, trials, and even the looming certainty of the electric chair held no terror for him. He acted like an earlier missing link in the human species. He seemed out of place in a white man’s civilization.

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⁸⁵ Ira Wells, ““What I Killed for, I Am”: Domestic Terror in Richard Wright’s America by Ira Wells,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 4 (December 2010), 873-895.

⁸⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 706-707.

Referring to Bigger's race dozens of times in about two pages, the report features him as an apelike "jungle beast" and "sex-slayer." It offers only two views of the black male. Since Bigger is "lack[ing] the charm of the average, harmless, genial, grinning southern darky so beloved by the American people" he is coldly classified as a "missing link ... out of place in a white man's civilization."⁸⁷ As a result, Bigger's crime is characterized as an attack on society and civilization at large. Once an offence is viewed as an assault on society and civilization, communities sometimes resort to lynching as a response. In a *Chicago Tribune* interview with the editor of the *Jackson Daily Star*, the editor argues that, in viewing Bigger's crime as an offense against society, "white civilization" characterizes the conflict as society's war against a kind of primitive brutality. When the barbarism symbolized by Bigger is necessary to conserve civilization itself.⁸⁸

The Daltons' Mansion

In contrast to the Thomas' kitchenette in the black ghetto of the South Side, the Dalton mansion symbolizes the power of capital. Mr. Dalton personifies capitalism and his daughter, Mary, is capitalism's fair handmaid, liberalism. Wright makes this explicit by casting Mr. Dalton not just as the Thomas' landlord, but also as Bigger's employer. Mr. Dalton offers Bigger a job as chauffeur for him and his daughter, Mary Dalton. As Bill Mullen persuasively argues, "like a monopoly capitalist, or racist realtor," *Native Son* creates "an isomorphic relationship between the restricted *place* of Bigger's living and the limited occupational *space* of his work. This strategy of representation bespeaks both the causal link between restrictive real estate covenants and segregation in cities like Chicago, and the division of labor under capitalism along racial lines. It suggests social space as both a real and metonymic index to the "place" of migrant African Americans under industrial capitalism."⁸⁹

The houses he passed were huge: lights glowed softly in windows. The streets were empty, save for an occasional car that zoomed past on swift rubber tires. This was a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded. He could feel a pride, a certainty, and a confidence in these streets and houses. He came to Drexel Boulevard and began to look for 4605. When he came to it, he stopped and stood before a high, black, iron picket fence, feeling constricted inside. All he had felt in the movie was gone; only fear and emptiness filled him now.

Would they expect him to come in the front way or back? It was queer that he had not thought of that. Goddamn! He walked the length of the picket fence in front of the house, seeking for a walk

⁸⁷ Clare Eby, "Slouching towards Beastliness," *African American Review*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2001), 448.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 448-449.

⁸⁹ Bill Mullen, "Space and Capital in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Twelve Million Black Voices*," 7.

leading to the rear. But there was none. Other than the front gate, there was only a driveway, the entrance to which was securely locked. Suppose 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 grew angry. Why had he come to take this goddamn job? He could have stayed among his own people and escaped feeling this fear and hate. This was not his world; he had been foolish in thinking that he would have liked it.⁹⁰

Stepping in the restrictive space, the white zone, both in terms of class and race, Bigger feels “fear and emptiness” and eventually “anger” and “hatred.” The insecurity he reveals is almost instinctual: trespassing by blacks into white spaces means punishment, perhaps even death. Thus, the massive white mansion not only embodies the “alienation of a worker’s labor” like in the relationship “between landlord-tenant, employer-employee,” but the institutionalized racial violence and the strategy of exclusion that Bigger has internalized.⁹¹ Wright captures the moment when the philanthropist and white landlord Mr. Dalton effectively controls Bigger’s fear and hatred at the first place. He writes:

“All right. Come this way.”

[Bigger] started at the sound of a man's voice

“Suh?”

“Come this way.”

Misjudging how far back he was sitting in the chair, his first attempt to rise failed and he slipped back, resting on his side. Grabbing the arms of the chair, he pulled himself upright and found a tall, lean, white-haired man holding a piece of paper in his hand. The man [Mr. Dalton] was gazing at him with an amused smile that made him conscious of every square inch of skin on his black body.⁹²

This scene illustrates that the power of Dalton comes from “a piece of paper,” rather than from direct physical violence, such as lynching. Exploring the evolution of penal systems in Western societies, Michel Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish* that disciplinary power “that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them.... A ‘power of writing’ was constituted as an essential part in the mechanisms of discipline.”⁹³ Even more effective than the whip in suturing the

⁹⁰ Wright, *Native Son*, 486.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁹² Wright, *Native Son*, 488.

⁹³ See Mikko Juhani Tuhkanen, “A Bigger’s place”: Lynching and Specularity in Richard Wright’s “Fire and Cloud” and *Native Son*,” *African American Review*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 189, note 4. Mikko comments, “Foucault is here speaking of the “examination” as an essential part of disciplinarian power and all-encompassing surveillance. In the scene from *Native Son*, Bigger is clearly “capture[d] and fix[ed]” in writing. Although what the paper Mr. Dalton is holding contains is not made explicit, Bigger is asked to produce another written document, one given to him by the relief organization which has sent him to the

"racialized" subject to "a nigger's place," Mikko Juhani Tuhkanen argues that writing—the piece of paper in the white man's hand—"arrests, fixes, and confines the black man and instructs him to remain in subjugation."⁹⁴ As opposed to the South, which uses excessive physical violence to control black bodies, the North representing the modern capitalist state practices institutionalized and bureaucratic control.

Liberal Philanthropy

Mary Dalton, who becomes the victim of the gruesome murder by Bigger Thomas, reveals another aspect of white liberal philanthropy and clearly resonates what Wright said about his first book and the liberal white audience.⁹⁵

Prior to meeting Mary, Bigger had found all white women "cold and reserve[d]; they stood their distance and spoke to him from afar. However, unlike other white women, Mary "waded right in and hit him between the eyes."⁹⁶ She even asks him to take her to a colored restaurant. Unconsciously parroting well-established stereotypes, Mary Dalton remarks patronizingly about the excessive emotionality of Black people and goes so far as to ask Bigger Thomas to sing her a spiritual. Her communist boyfriend, Jan Erlone, is adamant that he and Bigger shake hands and share a meal between the three of them. They navigate to Outer Drive at Thirty-first St., and pass by the tenement district where Bigger lives. Mary reaches out to Bigger, patting his arm, and says:

"You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into these houses," she said, pointing to the tall, dark apartment buildings looming to either side of them, "and just *see* how your people live. You know what I mean? I've been to England, France, and Mexico, but I don't know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so little about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people. Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They're *human*... There are twelve million of them... They live in our country... In the same city with us..."⁹⁷

When Mary and her boyfriend Jan Erlone, another well-intended humanistic communist, naively trespass the institutionalized border, Bigger feels the same kind of fear and anger when entering the white blocks of the city and Dalton's great mansion. Their liberal assumption that all humans are equal is far too simple. They are blindly insensitive to the racialized hierarchy that cannot be undone by their personal

Daltons." "Foucault writes of the examination that it "is the technique by which power, instead of emitting signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification."

⁹⁴ Ibid., 189.

⁹⁵ Jonathan Elmer, "Spectacles and Events in *Native Son*," *American Literature*, vol. 70, no. 4 (December 1998), 767-798.

⁹⁶ Clare Eby, "Slouching towards beastliness," 445.

⁹⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 510.

approach. And even worse, it participates and consolidates the enforced separation and systematic infliction.

Mark Blanc's concept of "border crossers" appropriately describes Mary and Jan's function in the narrative, insightfully exemplifying the need of critical double consciousness. "Members of the dominant culture typically tend to border cross without compromising their position of cultural and social privilege."⁹⁸ This type of border crosser can travel the world, scrutinize the "Other" in a curious and detached way without recognizing that cultural groups occupy different positions of power and status and that many cultural perceptions and practices result from such power asymmetries. Often, these types of ideologically and politically "blind" border crossers assume "tourist" or "voyeur" perspectives that are very much tainted by their unconscious deficit and White supremacist ideologies.⁹⁹ Lacking a critical double consciousness, they are unable to examine themselves through comradeship with the oppressed. Instead, they "study the other in a detached and curious manner without ever recognizing...positions of power."¹⁰⁰ Inherently privileged whites as border crossers believe that "they are helping people of color, but they are not seeing themselves as whites from perspectives of people of color." Thus, oppressed people of color continue to bear the "burdens of double consciousness" while whites carry on in the "delusion" that they are mitigating racial inequality.¹⁰¹

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

He felt foolish sitting behind the steering wheel like this and letting a white man hold his hand. What would people passing along the street think? He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin? Then why was Jan doing this? Why was Mary standing there so eagerly, with shining eyes? What could they get out of this? Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no

⁹⁸ Mark Blanc, "Fanon and DuBoisian Double Consciousness," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, vol.5, iss. 3, Article 36(2007), 401.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 401.

¹⁰⁰ L. I. Bartolome, "Critical Pedagogy and Teacher Education: Radicalizing Prospective Teachers," *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 31(1), 97. (2004), 109.

¹⁰¹ Mark Blanc, "Fanon and DuBoisian Double Consciousness," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, vol. 5, iss. 3, article 36. (Summer 2007), 401.

physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man's Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate.¹⁰²

Opposite to Mary and Jan's naïve wish to befriend Bigger, his "attention" is sharply pointed on the feeling of shame and mortification. Wright called it a "badge of shame" which is the pathological surface of the entity, which has "no physical existence" but to feel that negation in one's skin.¹⁰³

Bigger's focus on the negative perspectives of "black body, his black skin" from the outside society is an articulation of Du Bois' conception of double consciousness: the internalized otherness that African Americans feel when they look at themselves. Caught between two antagonistic identities causes a lot of time and energy to be spent negotiating the conflicts between one's intrinsic conception of personhood and the misrepresentations placed upon one based on externalities of the body. Regretfully Mary could never understand Bigger's psychological pressure from double consciousness because she does not have clear grasp of how she becomes a part of the racializing structure of capitalist America. As Marc Black persuasively argues, to comprehend Bigger, Mary also should have "double consciousness," which would enable her to see her racial position from the viewpoints of oppressed people of color. Then, only some type of "multilateral double consciousness," a term I borrow from Marc Blank, can enable a form of critical interracial dialogue. Bigger also has no way to articulate the double consciousness in himself because he has no mediation to obtain class and race consciousness but immediate fear and anger toward almost everything around him.

As many scholars have argued, in *Native Son*, Wright attempts to explain that racism can never be effectively combated by liberalism; its blindness to the economic realities and harsh class relations effectively enable the continuation of capitalism. Most of Wright's contemporaries depicted protagonists in social reform as white liberal Americans. In opposition to this trope, Wright creates a "new black subjectivity" in order to cast liberal solutions to racism in a critical light.¹⁰⁴ Bigger is different from other black subjectivities in that he does not want to embrace liberal ideology. Even in the Bigger's first encounter with Peggy O'Flaherty, an Irish cook and housekeeper in the Daltons' mansion, Wright challenges the liberal fantasy of self-making in which the support of white liberals (the Daltons) enable a black man to become educated and achieve middle class respectability. Instead, as Cynthia Tolentino argues, the story of

¹⁰² Wright, *Native Son*, 507-508.

¹⁰³ Jonathan Elmer, "Spectacles and Events in *Native Son*," *American Literature*, vol. 70, no. 4 (December 1998), 784.

¹⁰⁴ Cynthia Tolentino, "The Road out of the Black Belt: Sociology's Fictions and Black Subjectivity in *Native Son*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 33, no. 3 (Summer 2000), 384.

Green, the preceding black chauffeur, who attended night school and thereafter obtained a job in the civil service to "pull himself up by his bootstraps," serves as a set piece for Bigger to "challenge the prevailing liberal notions of acceptable black incorporation." Upon hearing Peggy say that Mr. Dalton has "done a lot for your people," citing this single instance as evidence, Bigger's perplexed reply of "My people?" shows his alternative valuation of so-called upward mobility, repudiating the white liberal-sanctioned process for the incorporation of blacks into mainstream society. Also, Peggy's intimacy with the liberal Daltons casts her in a conspiratorial light even though she claims to know "something about colored people" because her family "felt about England like the colored folks feel about this country."¹⁰⁵ Peggy mimics the liberal Daltons' simplistic views of solutions to black repression. In other words, she talks as if blacks go to night schools and obtain jobs and become middle class, then racism will disappear all of a sudden. As if all persons have "equal access to the state," regardless of circumstances, color, and conditions of their birth, true democracy will have been created. On the contrary, liberal emancipatory mythology cannot interest the new black subjectivity represented by Bigger. Rather, an alternative logic for racial reform must be put forward, confronting liberal narratives' models put forward for the admission of blacks in mainstream American.¹⁰⁶ Wright attempts to articulate a particular role for blacks within a transformed figuration of American national culture, criticizing the liberal attempt to assimilate African Americans into mainstream white America.¹⁰⁷

Published in 1940, *Native Son*, the first Black novel to reach a large white audience, shocked white readers in its contemptuous portrayal of self-identified white liberals, whom it scorned more than outright bigots.¹⁰⁸ In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright explains that rather than fawning over his white liberal audience, he was attempting to deliberately provoke them:

I had written a book of short stories under the title of *Uncle Tom's Children*. When the reviews began to appear, I realized that I had

¹⁰⁵ It is worthy of listening to Cynthia Tolentino's argument about difficulties of possible class-based alliance between Bigger and Peggy. She argues that Peggy's identification with the Daltons is an obstacle to a possible class-based alliance with Bigger. Peggy's loyalty to the Dalton family, dramatized through her repetition of liberal dogma, suggests that "she has fully reconciled herself to the status quo. Her moderate politics and apathy are further reflected through her self-characterization: "I always was one for sticking to a job. I always say when you get a good place, then stick there" (Wright, *Native Son*, 57). Peggy's self-identification as a member of the extended Dalton family and mimicking of their commitment to helping blacks illustrates the process by which the dominant classes secure their position through the reproduction of their thought, practices, and social vision. Peggy and Bigger articulate the way in which liberal discourse constructs collective black identity by situating blacks as the beneficiaries of white charity and benevolence." See Tolentino, "The Road out of the Black Belt: Sociology's Fictions and Black Subjectivity in *Native Son*," 384.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 384-385.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 399.

¹⁰⁸ Robert E. Fleming, "Roots of the White Liberal Stereotype in Black Fiction," *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Spring 1975), 17.

made an awfully naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.¹⁰⁹

Liberal philanthropists, who are nearly all “visible adherents to religion” and seen in good standing by the “larger white society,” are mocked and vilified. Frequently, these “wealthy and better educated whites” view their restraint in treatment of individual blacks as demonstrating their radical beliefs—simply because they may not subjugate blacks to the limits of racism accepted by wider society.¹¹⁰ Self-aggrandizement is of more interest to these “self-styled liberals” than the amelioration of the lives of the people they profess to be helping. The language of the Daltons and the language of Boris Max, the communist lawyer who acts as Bigger’s defense during his trial, are juxtaposed, underscoring liberal philanthropists’ hypocrisy. The Daltons’ language, laden with racial patronizing and sociological jargon, is internalized by Bigger.

Many critics argue that Max’s speech is inappropriate, but Wright uses the compelling technique of shifting Max’s speech into the narrative voice, which “mediates the findings of a sociological analysis with Bigger’s personal grievances.” Bigger, unable to describe the contradictions of white liberalism, hears his own frustrations voiced in Max’s speech illustrating the ineffectiveness of the philanthropy of the Daltons. As Max argues during his closing arguments at Bigger’s murder trial, the Dalton’s kindness and charity towards individual blacks and professed concern for the larger problems of black society were merely gestures towards inclusiveness; they cannot be viewed as good deeds of social reform because they are blinded to the “mechanisms of their own economic investments and practices in entrenching racism and black inequality.” Instead of defining the relationship between Bigger Thomas’ family and the Daltons in terms of race, Max points out the “material interdependence” of between these two families, contending that a more accurate portrayal is that of “renter to landlord, customer to merchant, employee to employer. The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton got rich.” Max becomes the “loudspeaker to Bigger’s enacted but unspoken critique of liberalism.” When Mr. Dalton insists that Bigger’s action will not affect his donations to Negro charities, Max denounces the contradictions that Bigger sees but has been unable to express: “Will ping-pong keep men from murdering?... Don’t you grant as much life-feeling to other men?”¹¹¹ Max wants Mary’s death to be felt by Dalton as a protest of liberal philanthropy as the solution to mainstream society’s racism and failure to incorporate blacks. In urging liberals such as the Daltons to conceive of new strategies for combating racism, Max delineates the

¹⁰⁹ Wright, *Native Son*, 772-773.

¹¹⁰ For example, a plantation owner may own slaves, but not beat them, or a minister may allow Blacks to attend church (in the "colored" gallery), or a planter may manumit some illegitimate children. See Fleming, “Roots of the White Liberal Stereotype in Black Fiction,” 17.

¹¹¹ Wright, *Native Son*, 720.

shared territory of liberal views of race and the institutions of racism and segregation.¹¹² As Tolentino argues, Max undermines the liberal philanthropic drive by “repeatedly juxtaposing it to the philanthropist’s capital gain,” pressing Mr. Dalton to relate how one can contribute large sums of money to Negro charities and then “exact an exorbitant rent of eight dollars per week from the Thomas family for one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep?”¹¹³

Max’s language mocks the Daltons’ reified philanthropy. Mr. and Mrs. Dalton stand for reified identities who are “individuals who think of their identities and those of others as natural, eternal, constituted by inherent qualities, self-generated, or otherwise autonomous from the determining effects of society and history.”¹¹⁴ Those characters unwittingly find their existence in the world tenuous and fragile.

Through Max’s authentic language set in opposition to the Daltons’ jargoned language, Wright creates a link between a critique of liberal narratives to sociological debates over race and racism. By doing so, he explicitly challenges the progressive models put forward by liberal narratives for the integration of blacks in mainstream American culture and creates an alternative teleology for racial reform.

Race / Class and Communist Party

Finally, I would like to finish this chapter by scrutinizing the relationship between Richard Wright and the Communist Party USA. In the process, I will briefly comment the issue of race and class.

As a “non-American,” Wright explores and defines the identity of the Americanness of non-Americans. For him “Americanness” is the site not only contesting whiteness but also negotiating between masses of common black people and the Communist Party. In “How Bigger Was Born” Wright expresses his anxiety about the reception of the white Party members. He writes:

“What would my own white and black comrades in the Communist Party say?” This thought was the most bewildering of all. Politics is a hard and narrow game; its policies represent the aggregate desires and aspirations of millions of people. Its goals are rigid and simply drawn, and the minds of the majority of politicians are set, congealed in terms of daily tactical maneuvers. How could I create such complex arid wide schemes of associational thought and feeling, such filigreed webs of dreams and politics, without being mistaken for a “smuggler of reaction,” “an ideological confusionist,” or “an individualistic and dangerous element?”¹¹⁵

¹¹² Tolentino, “The Road out of the Black Belt: Sociology's Fictions and Black Subjectivity in *Native Son*,” 398-399.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 399.

¹¹⁴ I borrow this concept from Marcial Gonzalez, *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 160.

¹¹⁵ Wright, *Native Son*, 868.

As Wright knew very well, the Communist Party preferred Wright to write about the themes of Negro exploitation with prophecies of white/Black proletarian solidarity against the capitalist enemy.¹¹⁶ According to his expectations, after the instant success of *Native Son*, many of Party critics took a serious view of Wright's ideological lapses. Especially, they criticized the fact that Wright "made Communists out to be insensitive fools like Jan and Mary." Furthermore, for them, the fact that even Boris Max, who is depicted as the most brilliant communist lawyer, does not understand Bigger and is feared by Bigger's vision of himself and "not a single white character" has any appreciation of what is going on in Bigger's mind.¹¹⁷ Also, they state that Bigger is not a representative of his people, though Wright says he is. For them, Bigger is a "frustrated, anti-social individual who commits anarchic acts of violence in his blind rebellion against capitalist society." Therefore it is "politically slanderous to contend that Bigger Thomas is the symbol of the Negro people."¹¹⁸ In short, selecting a character is not typical and making him the protagonist of a novel that deals with the bitter persecution and exploitation of a minority people in bourgeois society is bitterly wrong.¹¹⁹

As opposed to them, for Wright, Bigger is a typical character who can represent black people as well as who can illustrate "the dark and hidden places" of the proletariat, including the black masses. An episode vividly illustrates what Wright contemplated about the Party. One day Wright's mother came upon him reading *The New Masses* and *Anvil*.¹²⁰ After she looked at the images of workers clothed in ragged overalls, with bulging eyes, holding red banners, and waving clubs, stones, and pitchforks, she asked him, "What do Communists think people are?" From this personal experience, Wright came to realize that if the message was not clear to his mother then the communists were indeed going to have real trouble attracting the

¹¹⁶ Daniel Aaron, "Richard Wright and the Communist Party" in *Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives*, eds. David Ray and Robert Farnsworth (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1971), 43-44.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹²⁰ *The New Mass* was launched in 1926 as part of the Workers (Communist) Party of America's publishing stable, produced by a communist leadership but making use of the work of an array of independent writers and artists. The magazine, edited by primarily Michael Gold, Joseph Freeman, and Granville Hicks, became a highly influential publication and, from the 1930s onwards was considered as "the principal organ of the American cultural left from 1926 onwards." It was established to fill a void caused by the gradual transition of *the Workers Monthly* (successor to *The Liberator*) into a more theoretically-oriented publication. The name of the new magazine was a tip of the hat to *The Masses* (1911-1917), the forerunner of both of these publications. *The Anvil*, which was edited by Jack Conroy in the 1930s. The magazine was subtitled "Stories for Workers." The magazine was first published out of Missouri in 1933. Among the authors whose works appeared in the magazine were Richard Wright, Erskine Caldwell, and Maxim Gorky. In 1935, the magazine was folded into *the Partisan Review*. See Barbary Foley, *Radical Presentations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*, 65. See also Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the USA: From 1870 to the Present Day* (London: Verso, 1987), 172.

Negro masses. Thus, through his novel, he sought to reveal a more authentic, more historical, more precise image of the proletariat to which the party had committed itself. As Cedric Robinson argues, Bigger Thomas's lack of class consciousness is deliberate and purposive. This was not simply a literary device, but a means of coming to grips with the abstraction and romanticization of the proletariat that had infected communist ideology.¹²¹

Wright envisioned a unique role for himself in the Party as a conduit between common black people like his mother and the communists: "I would address my words to two groups: I would tell Communists how common people felt, and I would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of Communists who strove for unity among them."¹²² Wright's 1938 "Blueprint for Negro Literature" suggests the premises of his early thinking. In it, Wright explores the "relationship between class perspective and ethnic culture with the objective of bridging the gap between Marxism and Black Nationalism."¹²³ For Wright, only a dialectical approach to black culture could transcend a narrow nationalism on the one hand and orthodox Marxist economism on the other.

Wright felt that while it was important to interpret the Party's ideology to black people, it was his main task to transmit the complexity of the oppression of poor black people, particularly the so-called "non-proletarian section" represented by juveniles, unemployed and marginally employed workers, and black peasants.¹²⁴ In other words, Wright wanted to be a translator¹²⁵ who could mediate the two different elements. As a matter of fact, in *Native Son*, one of the main readers that Wright bore in mind was the communists, especially the party white leaders, to whom Wright wanted to explain that their analysis of black people's experience had only a half of the truth. The Communist Party's analysis was capitalized on mechanical materialism and left out the subjective, psychological, and dehumanizing effects of the suppression of more than 300 years on Black people's psychological reality.¹²⁶ What Wright as a

¹²¹ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 296.

¹²² Gabriel Mendes, "A Deeper Science: Richard Wright, Dr. Fredric Wertham, and the Fight for Mental Healthcare in Harlem, NY, 1940-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2010), 20-1.

¹²³ Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun (New York: Morrow, 1973), 36.

¹²⁴ Houston A. Baker, Jr., ed., "Introduction," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son: A Collection of Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: NJ., 1972), 6.

¹²⁵ For more discussion, see Walter D. Mignolo, "Zapatistas's Theoretical Revolution: Its Historical, Ethical, and Political Consequences" *Review*, xxv, 3, 2002, 245-75; and Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/ Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 1-88. Ramon Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subject: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-40.

¹²⁶ Donald Gibson, "Wright's Invisible Native Son," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Houston Baker Jr.(Englewood Cliffs, 1972), 104-5; see also Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 296-97.

Marxist sought to do was to expose this reality through his fiction so as to show that mere antiracist slogans could not comprehend nor dissipate the great hatred and fear which many blacks had for all whites, resulting from the daily, petty, often unconscious humiliations which the average white individual inflicted on the average black as well as from the institutionalized racism inflicted by the capitalist mode of production itself. Therefore, Wright called for an authentic Marxist analysis of this frustration and anger as the first step in mobilizing the consciousness of the black masses in the class struggle.¹²⁷

However, as we can see in the chairman of the CPUSA Earl Browder's argument—"What is the message that this powerful voice of the Communist Party is giving to America? First of all, it is the message of the need for the great mass of the people, the workers and farmers, to organize for their own protection," the Party's strategy, for Wright, is too simple and crude: the "growth of the Communist Party is the greatest guarantee" against racism and fascism.¹²⁸ Unfortunately, Wright claimed, the Communist Party failed to articulate its vision and program in ways that could appeal more widely to black Americans, especially those who had migrated from the South into cities like Chicago.¹²⁹

Around the relationship between Wright and the CPUSA, many narratives have come to pass. After all, the issue of how Wright's defection from the CPUSA

¹²⁷ James Kennedy, "The Content and Form of *Native Son*," *College English*, XXXIV (Nov. 1972), 283. Also, Carren Irr argues, through his cultural product *Native Son*, Wright strived to invite white Communists to reevaluate their misrepresentations of African culture, thereby furthering a productive dialogue between two groups. See Caren Irr, *The Suburb of Dissent: Cultural Politics in the United States and Canada during the 1930s*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 139.

¹²⁸ Earl Browder, "The 18th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party," in *The People's Front* (New York: International Publishers, 1938), 271, 275; Also see Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 287-305.

¹²⁹ According to Gabriel Mendes, Wright encountered his first major conflict within the Communist Party when he set out on his new project. As a member of the Party, Wright was assigned to a unit on the South Side of Chicago, the Black Belt. A unit was the basic mode of organization for the Party, and a unit leader directed each member into activities promoting the policies and programs of the Party. Wright's goal of being a writer contrasted with the vision of most of the black Communists he encountered in the Southside unit. They held intellectuals in suspicion of being class traitors or, even worse, Trotskyite apostates. Wright was questioned about the books he read and the ideas he held. Some of his comrades suggested he was a "smuggler of reaction," because he read bourgeois books. One fellow Negro Communist flatly informed him, "Intellectuals don't fit well into the party, Wright." He was stunned; how, he asked, could a man who swept streets for a living (he had lost the hospital job) be branded an intellectual? Wright had come up against a deep-seated mistrust of people who ask too many questions, not to mention men who wrote "bourgeois" novels. While the Party may have supported the idea of creating proletarian literature, officials in the Chicago Communist Party questioned his aims as a writer and asserted that it might be impossible to reconcile the desire to be a creative writer with the duties of community organizing and political agitation. See Gabriel Mendes, *A Deeper Science*, 21-22.

can be read has to do with the issue of the relations of race and class in terms of Black Nationalism and orthodox Marxism.

First, the “Black nationalist” view is reflective in Cedric Robinson’s argument. Robinson argues that “race was Western civilization’s epistemology, its ordering principle, its organizing structure, its moral authority, its economy of justice, commerce and power.”¹³⁰ For him race, not class, is the primary organizing category. Also, he asserts that racism preexisted capitalism and thus class cannot account for race.¹³¹ Racism is the ideological apparatus of a racialized social system. This means that racial phenomena in any society have their own structure.¹³² Analyzing Wright’s *Native Son*, Robinson argues the novel was a refutation of radical dogma (Marxism) from the vintage point of Black experiences. Wright sought, he continues, to “recreate that experience, and in so doing to force a confrontation between it and socialist ideology. Bigger Thomas’s character was specific to the historical experience of Blacks in the United States, but his nature was proletarian, that is world-historical.” In other words, Wright gave the consciousness of Bigger a “nationalist character.” Therefore, as for Robinson, Wright’s defection from the CPUSA that failed to articulate its vision and program in ways that could appeal more widely to black Americans, is too natural and unavoidable. Above all, for Robinson, the Communist Party is white organization.

However, interpreting *Native Son* as only a criticism of the Communist Party preferring African American culture is just as one-sided. Most scholars, as shown in Amy Carreiro’s case,¹³³ have tended to view *Native Son* as a hostile criticism of the CPUSA, emphasizing the aspects of the sense of betrayal that African Americans felt when the CPUSA regarded racial inequality as an economic class issue and seemed out of touch with many African American intellectuals’ increasing desire to end Jim Crow, lynchings, and segregation in the United States.¹³⁴ Even though the argument itself seems to be scarcely wrong—for their argument is based on the “facts,”—their underestimation of the role of the Party has weaknesses. As Daniel Aaron argues, the CPUSA worked harder than any other political party in America to challenge white supremacy. They “pushed Blacks into Party work...they nominated Negroes for political office, dramatized the Black man’s problem, risked social ostracism and even physical violence in behalf of Black people. No political party since the Abolitionists challenged American racial hypocrisy so zealously.”¹³⁵ In addition, by not

¹³⁰ Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, xxxi.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³² However, I believe one mistake Robinson makes is to equate class analysis with the analysis of capitalism.

¹³³ See Amy Carreiro, “Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: “Negrotarians” in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*,” *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 84, no. 3 (Summer 1999), 247-256.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 247-248.

¹³⁵ Daniel Aaron, “Richard Wright and the Communist Party,” in Ray and Farnsworth, eds., *Richard Wright: Impressions and Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1971), 41-42; see also St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, reprinted in 1993), 734-37.

distinguishing communism from the Party itself as an institution, they blur the delicate difference between them. Such an account throws open the door to the age-old interpretation that Wright discarded his communism because of his disillusionment against the CPUSA.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ It is helpful, then, to look at why many black intellectuals were drawn to the CPUSA in the New Deal era instead of the Franklin Roosevelt's party in order to understand the meaning and position of the CPUSA for African Americans. According to Harvard Sitkoff, unlike common sense, the economic and social inequalities between blacks and whites were highlighted during the Great Depression. Under Agricultural Adjustment Act, southern white sharecroppers averaged one hundred dollars and white farm workers over fifty dollars a year more than black sharecroppers and workers. In New York City, the unemployment rate for male African Americans was over 40 percent, while the unemployment rate among white males was much lower at 23 percent. Harvard Sitkoff argues that exclusion and discrimination in the New Deal Programs prompted African American leaders to consider Roosevelt's New Deal plan a "raw deal" for black Africans. As a result, Roosevelt's plan excluded most African Americans, which led them to the CPUSA, which encouraged a discourse on the plight of African Americans. See Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Volume I: The Depression Decade* (New York, 1978), 53. See also Gregory Meyerson, "Post-Marxism as Compromise Formation," *Cultural Logic*, 62-70. <http://clogic.eserver.org/2009/Meyerson.pdf>. Note: Gregory Meyerson's argument is worth listening up, "The anti-racism of the communist party U.S.A. brought to light in the 1990s renders suspect the standard anti-communist narrative. Autobiographies of black communists like Hosea Hudson, Harry Haywood (likely, Wright's Zip Coon), Nate Shaw, Ben Davis and William Patterson and the work of historians – like Mark Naison on the Communist Party in Harlem, Robin Kelley on the Sharecroppers Union and on African-Americans in the Lincoln Brigades, Gerald Horne's study of the Civil Rights Congress, a mass organization headed up by William Patterson and patterned after the ILD, the International Labor Defense of Scottsboro fame, documents collected on American Communism by Phillip Foner while by no means romanticizing the movement, do significant damage to the cold-war vision of white communists "using" blacks. It is a vision meant to suggest that multi-racial unity is a sham, a mask for white domination, whether by abolitionists, carpetbaggers, communists, or white unions."

He continues, "The manipulation thesis takes it as axiomatic that nationalist and/or mainstream organizations respect people instead of using them, like the communists do. Robin Kelley's commentary on the ILD and the black elite's response to it is, therefore, worthy of notice: The ILD's presence aroused an equally passionate, though much different, response from black Alabamians [much different from the white elite's violence toward the ILD]. The party had already built a strong base of support within black working-class communities because of its relief campaign, but once the ILD entered the Scottsboro case, the CP quickly earned a reputation as a "race" organization. Although the move grew out of a pre-existing policy to defend all "class-war prisoners," the ILD suddenly found itself immersed in the world of race politics. Through their participation in the Scottsboro defense as well as a panoply of local cases involving poor black defendants, ILD activists directly challenged the leadership of Birmingham's black elite. Once Scottsboro hit the daily newspapers, Birmingham's traditional black leaders at first dissociated themselves from the case and berated the Communists for meddling in Southern affairs. The Birmingham World, in an editorial entitled "Cast Down Your Buckets Where You Are!" supported Alabama's legal system 100 percent. "Birmingham," the writer reported, "has proved [sic] that a man

On the contrary, Wright never discarded his communism; rather, he strengthened the communist idea by challenging economic reductionist point of view of the Stalinist communists regarding an issue of race and racism. As John Reilly states, even when he became strongly anti-Stalinist in the 1940s, the politics he had learned through the Communist Party continued to occupy his attention, leading him to explore in his later writing the importance of ideology in the Cold War, the nature of totalitarianism, and the relevance of Marxism to third-world liberation struggles.¹³⁷

Wright's position was based on not binary opposition but on translation, which made it impossible to dump one thing completely and transform into a totally different thing. Understanding that he left the party it differed from his original, fixed image of it would reduce the situation to the level of sentimental romantic melodrama. As an autonomous intellectual, he was undoubtedly influenced by factors outside the CPUSA while he was in the Party, and likewise he remained influenced by what he learned as a Party member after he left. Therefore, it is significant that his experience in the Party gave him a chance to elevate his recognition of his own community.

As a matter of fact, in *Native Son*, the depiction of the Communist Party is not that simple many critics have argued. Jan is depicted as an obtuse and mechanical Party member, expecting Bigger to respond magically to his appeals for class solidarity. Wright, as we already saw, illustrates the way Jan and Mary reinforce Bigger's feelings of anger and isolation even as both of them attempt to show their desire for black equality. However, at the end of the book, it is the communist organizer Jan Erlone who gets awakened from Mary's death unlike the liberal Daltons.

can get a just and fair trial in the Southland regardless of color." While questioning the evidence presented in court, Oscar Adams . . . nevertheless felt the defendant's testimony carried little weight because they were "poorly trained, [and] primitive when we think of intelligence." NAACP national secretary Walter White also expressed some skepticism at first. Adopting a wait-and-see attitude, he did not send a lawyer to Alabama until the nine defendants had been convicted. White questioned the ILD's intentions, suggesting that the organization was interested less in the defendant's welfare than in revolution ordered from Moscow. Furthermore, he believed the ILD duped the parents into accepting its support since the families were, in White's words, "of humble background and with meager educational and other advantages." When White "recognized that black public opinion was beginning to shift to the ILD," he tried to "wrest control of the case from them." As Meyerson asserts, it is interesting to speculate on the connection between the charge that Communists see workers as dupes of false consciousness and the anticommunist elitism that sees workers as duped by communists due to their ignorance. See Robin Kelley, Also, see Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 80. Also see *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Gerald Horne, *Communist Front?: Civil Right Congress 1946-1956* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988) and *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Delaware: University Of Delaware Press, 1994); Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: An Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1978); Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers* (New York: Knopf, 1975).

¹³⁷ John Reilly, "Richard Wright's Apprenticeship," *Journal of Black Studies*, vol.2, no. 4 (June 1972), 441.

He begins to understand how Bigger might have felt and why Bigger acted out in those ways against Mary and himself. Also the communist lawyer Max, who is the author's voice, gives meaning and language to Bigger's life struggles. And it is the theoretical framework of Marxism that gives its final section meaning.

During the 1930s, the prevailing view among orthodox Marxists of the relation between class and race was mechanistic. The orthodox Marxian viewpoint depends on the model that the economic is the base and the cultural/political/ideological is the superstructure. The economic base causes the political/cultural/ideological superstructure, which is epiphenomenal.¹³⁸ In this model, other types of social divisions and conflicts are downplayed and regarded as derivations of the class structure.¹³⁹ This viewpoint tends to reduce almost everything to economics. Art, religion, politics, law, and morality are all seen as nothing more than reflections of the economy or class struggle. The true complexity of human affairs is passed over for a "monochromatic" vision of history. In the case of racism, their position is that racism is just an ideology used by the bourgeoisie to divide workers.¹⁴⁰ In other words, racism is functional to the preservation of capitalism: dominant class interests use racism to impede working-class solidarity and divide workers from each other. Therefore, the victims of racism who overlook the class dimension necessarily become the prey of capitalism. The orthodox Marxists argue that rather than looking at the politico-economic system that has victimized them, the victims blame an undifferentiated "White racism."¹⁴¹ This viewpoint subsumes racism under the general rubric of working-class exploitation. Therefore, as Cornel West correctly points out, it tends to ignore racism not determined by the workplace

¹³⁸ As opposed to orthodox Marxists of the 1930s in the USA, currently some Marxist critics have attempted to develop more flexible interpretations of racial phenomena. For example, John Solomos *argues* that there is no problem of 'race relations' which can be thought of separately from the structural (economic, political, and ideological) features of capitalist society and there can be no general Marxist theory of racism, since each historical situation needs to be analyzed in its own specificity and 'racial' and 'ethnic' divisions cannot be reduced to or seen as completely determined by the structural contradictions of capitalist societies. See John Solomos, *Riots, urban protest, and social policy: The interplay of reform and social control* (Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, Arts Building, University of Warwick, 1986), 104. Harold Wolpe has suggested that what is needed to adequately grasp issues of race is a non-reductionist conception of class. Class, for Wolpe, should be regarded as a process rather than as an abstract category. Class "is constituted, not as unified social force, but as a patchwork of segments which are differentiated and divided on a variety of bases and by varied processes." See Harold Wolpe, "Class Concepts, Class Struggle and Racism," in *Theories of Race Relations edited by John Rex and David Mason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 121.

¹³⁹ Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 73.

¹⁴⁰ Albert Szymanski, *Class Structure: A Critical Perspective* (New York: Prager Publishers, 1983), 402.

¹⁴¹ Michael Parenti, *Land of Idols: Political Mythology in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 133.

and fails to probe other spheres of American society where racism plays an integral role, such as in the “cultural and psychological spheres.”¹⁴²

As opposed to the dominant idea of race and racism at that time that viewed racism as the “natural” outcome of racial or cultural contacts among different peoples and viewed race as biological and essential, the orthodox Marxian view of racism and race as “structural” was outstanding. That is, it highlighted the relation of racist practices to the capitalist mode of production and recognized the crucial role racism plays within the capitalist economy.¹⁴³

However, they regarded race relations as a “secondary” category of group association. Race was seen as a social construct and racism as an ideology used by powerful social actors such as the bourgeoisie to exploit racial minorities. They regarded racism and racial antagonism as direct products of class dynamics. Also, according to them, racial strife was conceived as emanating from false interests. Because the unity of the working class and the impending socialist revolution are “a priori Marxists axioms,” racial (or for that matter, gender-based) struggles cannot be viewed as having their own material basis (that is, as based on the different interests of the actors involved). Consequently, racism must be explained as “ideological” or “irrational.” Also, orthodox Marxists shied away from performing any in-depth analysis of the politics and ideologies of race.¹⁴⁴ As many current Marxist theorists, including Terry Eagleton and Greg Meyerson have argued, Marxism properly interpreted, unlike orthodox Marxism, points out the inadequacies of the formula “base and superstructure” and inseparability of “the economic” and “the political.” It does not divide them into the economic base (equated with “class” and “impersonal forces,” the two in turn synonymous with “structure”) and the political superstructure. They “mutually determine one another.” Gregory Meyerson argues, “when you split the economic and the political and then recombine them, you do not have dialectics but an incoherent amalgam of incommensurable categories.”¹⁴⁵ In fact, as Terry Eagleton argues, we should emphasize the primacy of class in a different way. In other words, one is the primacy of the working class as a revolutionary agent—a primacy which does not, as often thought, render women and people of color “secondary.” Such an equation of white male and working class, as well as a corresponding division between a “white” male working class identity and all the others, whose identity is thereby viewed as either primarily one of race and gender, is wrong.¹⁴⁶ Also, the “primacy of class” should be understood to mean that “building multiracial, multi-gendered international working-class organizations” should be the goal of any transformative movement: “the primacy of class puts the fight against racism and

¹⁴² Cornel West, “Toward A Socialist Theory of Racism,” <http://race.eserver.org/toward-a-theory-of-racism.html>.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ See Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Meyerson, “Post-Marxism as Compromise Formation,” 5.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 5.

sexism at the center.”¹⁴⁷ Economic and social inequality “cannot be divorced from the racial history” of the United States. In fact, racializing structures and racist practices cannot be understood and explained apart from the class-defined economic and political history of the country. It is the “materialist structures” underpinning such phenomena that provide meaning, and substantial implications from which to draw lessons.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Gregory Meyerson, “Rethinking Black Marxism: Reflections on Cedric Robinson and others,” *Cultural Logic*, vol.3 (1/2 2000), 1. Available from <http://eserver.org/clogic/3-1%262/meyerson.html>.

¹⁴⁸ See E. San Juan, in *The Wake of Terror: Class, Race, Nation, Ethnicity in the Postmodern World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 23-40.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding chapters, I dealt with the two ethnic minority writers who wrote about what America was like during the 1930s and 1940s. In these chapters I explored the relationship between race and class for a racialized minority within the framework of Marxist theory. In the first chapter on Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*, I argued that America is a reified society, which is very different from the society Kang has dreamed for a long time. Analyzing Kang's autobiographical novel *East Goes West*, I employed the theoretical frame of "reification" to explore the social structure that prevents Han, Kang's alter ego, from being accepted as an American no matter how ardently he wishes for acceptance. We saw that the structural obstacles Han faces in the process of searching for his "dream America" are mainly reification caused by capitalistic rationalization and calculation and racism, which determines the lives of people of color in the US along with class. In the process, we witnessed both strengths and limitations of Kang's understanding of contemporary America. Though he criticizes a reified American society such as rationalization, quantification, and objectification, he emphasizes the transhistoric or transcendental "infinite" as opposed to current reified specialization. His criticism of the division of labor under capitalism ends up with longing for an anachronistic "organic romanticism."

In the second chapter, I focused on the notions of 'whiteness' and 'spatial logic' in considering the America of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. For Wright, America is a place where whiteness is omnipresent. Whiteness, as the privileged signifier, always reminds African Americans of the power and control that hangs over them. As we saw, the logic of whiteness powerfully influences the lives of African Americans by excluding them. Also, it has much to do with logic of space, which defines and determines the fatal social relationships of the protagonist Bigger Thomas's life and his limited political consciousness. Chicago's Black Belt, is rendered as a privatized terrain of capital that in turn atomizes consciousness and embodies alienation within the city's limited geographic boundaries. The social position of African Americans who lived in Chicago during the 1930s was absolutely reflected in the spaces they were confined to, because of their institutional segregation from the white's wealth. Wright depicts the racializing effects of capitalism through the production and segregation of space in Chicago, which reinforces the divisive strategies of American capitalism. Also, I scrutinized the relationship between Richard Wright and the Communist Party of USA. In the process, I mentioned the issue of race and class.

I would like to finish this conclusion by mentioning some of commonalities and differences between Kang and Wright. First, there are commonalities and differences between Kang and Wright in terms of the idea of philanthropy. The two writers mock and vilify liberal philanthropists such as the Livelys and the Daltons. They are all proud of helping other people they profess to be helping. In Kang's *East Goes West*, when Mr. Lively offers a sales position to the protagonist Han, Han's first thought is that Lively is charitable and generous, "as full of good will as ever." Mr. Lively says his company's purpose is to give generous service. He is very proud of his business, which is "famed for service to customer, to salesman, to home, church,

country throughout this great magnificent United States of America.” He states philanthropy is essential to the growth of his company and further the United States. Philanthropy springs from the “generosity” of American people like him, which is something uniquely American and is one of the United States’ great strengths. However, as we already saw in the first chapter, philanthropy derives not from his generosity but from the logic of capitalism and profit maximization. Lively, as a seemingly “philanthropic” entrepreneur, provides Han with a room at his house, good food, and a job. However, at the same time, he tries to exploit Han’s labor. Lively tries to commodify him as a tool for his own profit. Lively takes advantage of “philanthropy” as a method of exploiting other employees.

Similarly, the Daltons’ philanthropy is used to achieve fame and self-satisfaction for them and to salve his feelings by giving money. Henry Dalton owns the real estate company, which controls a lot of the South Side, and maintains African Americans in Chicago ghetto. Blacks in the ghetto pay much more for rat-infested kitchenette apartments than whites. His company refuses to rent apartments to African Americans outside of the designated ghetto area. Meanwhile Mr. Dalton buys ping-pong tables for the South Side Boys’ Club, local black youth outreach program, donates money to the NAACP, and hires individual blacks to work in his house. However, Mr. Dalton's philanthropy, like that of Mr. Lively’s, only shows off his wealth while strengthening the business practices which contain already wretched people. Self-aggrandizement is of greater interest to these “self-styled liberals” than using their power to ameliorate the lives of the people they profess to be helping.

Second, both writers tackle the issue of some form of “romanticization.”¹ Kang criticizes the American capitalist system that transforms “life” into a “thing.” However, his critique is one-sided and based on a romantic negation of capitalism. His romantic ideology is deeply influenced by his childhood education in Korea as well as his study of English Romantic poets like Keats and Wordsworth. The shadow of ‘feudal nostalgic’ anti-capitalism falls on his critique. When the protagonist Chungpa Han’s desire to be accepted in America has been frustrated, he turns his eyes to old time philosophy and Romantic English writers and poets, just as his compatriots turn their eyes to their homeland when rejected in U.S. society.²

As opposed to Kang’s romanticizing East society as an organic society that frees from repression and material exploitation and mechanistic time, Wright criticizes the Communist Party’s romanticizing of the proletariat. According to Wright, the Communist Party USA does not succeed in distinguishing between the concrete historical form of class consciousness and its abstraction. The question of the class consciousness of laborers and subsequently that of political organization is not that simple. He writes:

The Communists, I felt, had oversimplified the experience of those whom they sought to lead. In their efforts to recruit masses, they had

¹ I would like to thank Sau-ling Wong for suggesting that I include the commonalities and differences between Kang and Wright in terms of romanticization, ideas of space and philanthropy, interactions between blacks and Asians.

² Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature*, 38-39.

missed the meaning of the lives of the masses, had conceived of people in too abstract a manner. I would try to put some of that meaning back, I would tell Communists how common people felt, and would tell common people of the self-sacrifice of the Communists who strove for unity among them.

The Party's notion of proletariat as an agent of socialist revolution, Wright cannot buy fully. Wright writes:

The blindness of their limited lives— lives truncated and impoverished by the oppression they had suffered long before they had ever heard of Communism made them think that I was with their enemies. American life had so corrupted their consciousness that they were unable to recognize their friends when they saw them. I know that if they had held state power I should have been declared guilty of treason and my execution would have followed. And I knew that they felt with all the strength of their black blindness they were right.³

Wright realized a fury dammed up to the level of demolition of self among his African American comrades. It, as Cedric Robinson argues, was not simply an ideology which lay at the base of their need to physically violate errant comrades. They were blind, as Wright wrote, because their enemies had blinded them with too much oppression and exploitation.⁴

Therefore, for Wright it was urgent to tell his words to Communists on how common Black people felt. *Native Son* was the “result of his resolve to have his say.” He wanted to explore the “relationship between class perspective and ethnic culture with the objective of bridging the gap between Marxism and Black Nationalism.”⁵ For Wright, only a dialectical approach to black culture could transcend a narrow nationalism on one hand and orthodox Marxist economism on the other. However, the Party still romanticized the proletariat. Wright felt that while it was important to interpret the Party's ideology to black people, it was his main task to transmit the complexity of the oppression of poor black people, particularly the so-called “non-proletarian section” represented by juveniles, unemployed and marginally employed workers, and black peasants. Wright wanted to explain that the Party's analysis of black people's experience included only a half of the truth. The Communist Party's analysis was capitalized on mechanical materialism and left out the subjective, psychological, and dehumanizing effects of the suppression of more than 300 years on Black people's psychological reality.⁶

³ Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), quoted in Robert Sayre, ed. *American Lives: An Anthology of Autobiographical Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 577.

⁴ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 295-296.

⁵ Michel Fabre. *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun (New York: Morrow, 1973), 36.

⁶ Donald Gibson, “Wright's Invisible Native Son,” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Houston Baker Jr., ed. (Englewood Cliffs, 1972),

In other words, Wright called into question of the consciousness of the proletarian masses. He insisted on the necessity for comprehending the workers in their own terms. Wright was concerned with the ability of the working class people to reproduce themselves spiritually and culturally. "If they could no longer recreate the social ideologies which had sustained them, it would not be possible for them to fulfill the historical role" that Marxism assigned them.⁷ In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," he writes:

When the Nazis spoke of the necessity of a highly ritualized and symbolized life, I could hear Bigger Thomas on Chicago's South Side saying: "Man, what we need is a leader like Marcus Garvey. We need a nation, a flag, an army of our own. We colored folks ought to organize into groups and have generals, captains, lieutenants, and so forth. We ought to take Africa and have a national home." I'd know, while listening to these childish words, that a white man would smile derisively at them. But I could not smile, for I knew the truth of those simple words from the facts of my own life. The deep hunger in those childish ideas was like a flash of lightning illuminating the whole dark inner landscape of Bigger's mind. Those words told me that the civilization which had give birth to Bigger contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and had left him stranded, a free agent to roam the streets of our cities, a hot and whirling vortex of undisciplined and unchannelized impulses.⁸

What Wright sought to do was to expose this reality through his fiction to show that mere antiracist slogans, based on romanticization of the proletariat, could not comprehend nor dissipate the great hatred and fear which many blacks had for all whites, resulting from the daily, petty, often unconscious humiliations which the average white individual inflicted on the average black, as well as from the institutionalized racism inflicted by the capitalist mode of production itself. The "fragmentation of personality, social relations and ideology" that Wright observed was so total that its political and historical implications seriously challenged the presumptions of the social revolutionary movement capitalized on the concept that the proletarian class can generate a "unique standpoint that can capture the perspective of the *totality*" by grasping secret dimensions of capitalism that are occluded by the bourgeois focus on exchange relations.⁹ Therefore, Wright called for an authentic Marxist analysis of this frustration and anger as the first step in mobilizing the consciousness of the black masses in the class struggle.

104-105; see also Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 296-297.

⁷ Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 297.

⁸ Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," 865.

⁹ Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 297-299.

Third, it is interesting to compare between the spatial logic treated by Wright and the logic of space by Kang. In two novels, the logic of space has much to do with the logic of capitalist accumulation. Both spaces show capitalism's landscape and spatial designs, the "relationships of its parts to its wholes," or "capitalist totality" in Bill Bullen's terms.¹⁰ In *East Goes West*, the Boshnack Brothers' Department Store represents a microcosm of the reified U.S. society. There humanity is totally replaced by the logic of capitalist accumulation. Money-the first-ism as the almighty god of the United States ultimately betrays the penetrating power of reification.

In *Native Son*, capital and space, which are entangled with each other, are also connected with the geography of race. As Bill Mullen argues, in spite of capital's desire to search for "markets of exchange and modes of accumulation" regardless of race and ethnicity, specific forms of capitalist development, like the rise of northern industrial U.S. economy, relied heavily on the "forced and voluntary movements of racialized populations into increasingly concentrated and restricted spheres."¹¹ The rat-infested kitchenette apartment of the Thomas family is a symbolic space, which determines African American life under northern industrial capitalism.

Fourth, it is also interesting that while Chungpa Han interacts with blacks, Bigger Thomas does not interact with Asians. Chungpa Han does not lock himself into the overdetermined binary logic of white/black. Traveling various places unlike Bigger Thomas, he experiences many people and places as a cosmopolitan, partly because of his detachment from Korean American nationalist movement. Throughout the episodic structure of *East Goes West*, Chungpa meets many blacks. Chungpa finds greater humanity in Harlem, and illustrates the place as an embodiment of the spirit of the age and modern American culture. Unlike Chungpa Han, Bigger Thomas is locked in the black ghetto or Dalton mansion in Chicago. His world is overwhelmingly based on the dichotomy of white/black.

In the two works, the writers seek out a "new" America. However, the two writers have different ideas in terms of "what America is." Younghill Kang quests for the imaginary America, a utopia¹² formulated in their hearts and minds even long

¹⁰ Bill Mullen, "Space and Capital in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Twelve Million Black Voice*," 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² As well known, Karl Marx regarded the utopian impulse as quite negative because for him utopian thinking could weaken people's revolutionary energy into "idle wish-fulfillments." That is to say, his criticism of utopian thinking was strongly based on "practice" of his time. His position is understandable in that his era was much less reified than in 20th century late capitalism. He was able to envision revolt against the capitalist system more concretely. What is at stake is the fact the times have changed. Fredric Jameson argues, following Bloch, "For where in the older society (as in Marx's classic analysis) utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions, in our own time the very nature of the utopian concept has undergone a dialectical reversal. Now it is practical thinking which everywhere represents a capitulation to the system itself, and stands as a testimony to the power of that system to transform even its adversaries into its own mirror image." See Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 110-111.

before they get to the United States, whereas Richard Wright from the beginning does not idealize “America.” It is because Wright’s position toward “America” is very different from those of Kang in that the former is “colonial/racialized subjects”¹³ within the boundary of the United States while Kang is an immigrant.

Utopian thinking “keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively” different from current world. That is, utopia is not simply escapism, but a positive practice. In utopia, the present is the past of a specific, fictional future. In other words, utopia tries to grasp the fragmentary parts of the present as a single totality by glimpsing it from an imaginary future. See Matthew Beaumont, “*News from Nowhere* and the Here and Now: Reification and the Representation of the Present in Utopian Fiction,” *Victorian Studies*, vol.47, no.1 (2004), 35-39.

For Jameson, the ideological has to be understood at the same time as utopian. Jameson argues that “to project an imperative to thought in which the ideological would be grasped as somehow at one with the Utopian, and the Utopian at one with the ideological is to formulate a question to which a collective dialectic is the only conceivable answer.” See Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 286-287.

For Jameson, ideological manipulation and utopian gratification in all cultural texts cannot be separated. Therefore, the proposition that all cultural texts contain a utopian dimension is the logical extension of the “proposition that all class consciousness – or in other words, all ideology in the strongest sense, including the most exclusive forms of ruling-class consciousness just as much as that of oppositional or oppressed classes – is in its nature Utopian.” See Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, 289.

¹³ Colonial/racialized subjects refer to the oppressed groups who have been “incorporated into the U.S. Empire including those within the nation’s borders throughout a long history of colonialism. In this category, Native Americans, and African Americans can be included. See Ramon Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subject: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 148.

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