

## Foregrounding the Quest for Lost Identity in Wright's Native Son

Ali Poordaryaei Nejad

Assistant Professor of Hormozgan University  
Bandar Abass, Iran  
Ali.poordaryaei@yahoo.com

Doi:10.5901/mjss.2013.v4n13p653

### Abstract

This paper revisits Wright's *Native Son*, a great yet controversial mid-twentieth century novel, by adopting the aspect of lost identity and its related perspectives in the sense that blacks living in America must have a sense for their bereft and violated identity and belonging. The sovereignty of white world among African-Americans undermines, obliterates, or ignores the established national borders, while large number of people are dispersed across wide geographical areas, and diasporas identities are formed along multiple geographical locations, the results of slavery, exile, or emigration. The diasporas identities are provided by a decoupling between the dominating power and people's real identities. These identities may develop along cosmopolitan, multi-racial and multilingual lines. They produce a pluralized identity among the people of such domain; they are subject to change the linguistic, ethnic, hence they will be marginalized and racial merger will make them quest their own real identity, because they have become the emptied-out shell. Consequently, these conditions provide extensive struggles among African-American people to gain their lost identities; it is transparently the same fact which the present study is to look for, in order to demonstrate and foreground some instances of the sense of lost identity, in Wright's *Native Son*.

**Keywords:** Identity, Individual, Society, Fear, Change.

### 1. Introduction

The study starts with a brief introduction of colonial discourse and some aspects of identity in a colonial literature, using the theoretical frameworks extrapolated by Marx, Lukacs, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari, to name a few, which is then followed by a close analysis of the different layers of socio-cultural, economical, psychological, religious and political identities which the main character of Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son* encounters in the course of the novel. The article ends, conclusively, by briefly monitoring on the issue that for the blacks living in twentieth-century American racism and the struggle for their identity is entirely unavoidable, and the extracts cited in the main body of the article serve mainly to contextualize and support such a claim.

### 2. Discussion

The racial strife produces the multitude of subjects and identities, which is often spoken of its social construction in which the subject is doubled in a transgressive rewriting of colonial discourse. This condition keeps the person's codes of integrity at society's margins; they are depicted in Wright's novel, *Native Son*. These produce some struggles among the blacks to make themselves equal to the whites. This phenomena is omnipresent in one of the characters of Wright's novel, among the many characters in the book, one stands out as the lead conventionally so in the novel's whole, Bigger Thomas is more emblematic, more spoken of than present. He is a black young man when we first meet him, already showing signs of the eccentric activist that he will become. Bigger is given to gang that he deems in need of a little nature. As a black young man Bigger's code of integrity keeps him at society's margins. He refuses to follow custom and work as Dalton's chauffeur. Mr. Dalton tells Bigger that he is a great supporter of the NAACP- the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and he hires Bigger, in order to support the black, but it seems, the overwhelming power of white world is so eminent that Mr. Dalton can't support Bigger, this power reveals while Bigger with his gun intends to visit Mr. Dalton either at the front or the back of the house, and "he stands outside the imposing iron fence of the Dalton's mansion and is filled with a mixture of fear and hate, feeling foolish for having thought he might like this job"(1993:54). Additionally, Robert James Butler claims that Bigger's "tangled duality has damaged him at the very center of his being"(1986:14), hence Bigger quests his true identity. Mr. Dalton has veered from his father's 'old-

fashioned,' humane treatment of his employees in favor of such modern measures as downsizing and cutting employee benefits, but Dalton and his daughter, Mary will wind up victimized by the very forces of racialism.

Bigger and his family live in one of the many slum apartments of Chicago's predominantly black South side. The rough conditions of South side life are dramatized at the beginning of the novel when Bigger is roused awake by his mother and younger siblings so that he might kill a yellow-fanged rat. Bigger's anger and pride alternatively determine much of the novel's beginning, especially while Bigger is willing to brutalize his fellow gang members, his killing of multi-millionaire heirs, Mary Dalton is purely accidental; and "Bigger's good intentions are mere drops in what has become a sea of collective helplessness"(1993:62-65).

Desperate for respite from poverty and lost identity, Bigger with his street gang briefly considers robbing a white man's delicatessen, Mr. Blum, but they remembered that they have never committed any robbery against a white man before, because the dominating power of white world is so much that the robbery of them meant 'a symbolic change' to white world. Even Bigger's mother is cautious of the same fact too, and he advised Bigger that "wealthy white people treat black people better than they treat poor whites"(1993:85).

Knitting to the white world dominating power, we want to suggest a multiplicity of approaches to *Native Son*, a novel so seemingly old-fashioned and straightforward in its narrative that it seems to ward off contemporary methods of narrative analysis. In one sense Wright's novel is perfectly Lukácsian: "the broad scale of his social depiction serves to measure the real against an ideal that is always powerfully present yet never in objective reality"(1971:63) to show the limits of extant ideologies and modes of being. At the level of the individual, we might connect the novel's lead characters (including Bigger, Mr. Dalton, and Jan Erlone) to Kenneth Burke's concept of 'symbolic inference' as Frederic Jameson understands it. Even the so-called 'great aesthetic productions of capitalism,' Jameson writes, prove . . . to be the cries of pain of isolated individuals against the operation of transindividual laws, the invention of so many private languages and sub codes in the midst of reified speech, and symptomatic expressions . . . of a damaged subject in their vain efforts to subvert an intolerable social order (1978:507). Therefore, these conditions and their struggles produce the lost sense of identity among them, hence we wish to adjust Jameson's notion in two ways. First, where he speaks of 'isolated individuals,' we want to suggest that this isolation is actual rather than perceptual. More useful here, we think, is Norbert Elias's concept of figuration, which may be described as the various operative connections experienced from a human point of view at all levels of culture and nature in a given society; when these change appear, a community is thrown into a state of confusion, because a profound shift in figuration necessarily entails a change in self-perception. Elias concentrates on "the shift between the geo-centric worldview and the ego-centric worldview that emerges in the Renaissance" (2000:44). *Native Son* chronicles the predatory ruthlessness of late capitalism that has affected a no less profound shift in ways that we still cannot measure fully. The destruction of Bigger's family and his personality, a cacophonous destruction that haunts the novel's last hundred pages or so, seems to express a mass delirium. Or perhaps we can, following Gregory Bateson, think of it as corresponding to the immanent mind gone mad (2000:460).

It may be noted that this turn toward delirium brings us closer to Deleuzian (and Deleuzo-Guattarian) territory, and we go further in this direction with a second modification of Jameson. As previously quoted, Jameson speaks of capitalism's inevitable production of "the cries of pain of isolated individuals against the operation of transindividual laws, the invention of so many private languages and sub codes in the midst of reified speech"(1978:507). Here, Jameson may as well be speaking of minor language as defined by Deleuze and Guattari, which is the other sign of lost identity. This creative work, this 'invention of private languages and sub codes' comprise the fruit of, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, "the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great . . . literature"(1986:42). This point becomes clear in Bigger's first meeting with Mr. Dalton, while Bigger answers him timidly with few words apart from 'yessuh', 'nawsuh', 'Goddammit', and 'Goddamn', he articulates words as the white world wishes him to be, this invented language and the minor literature are the results of lost identity.

Minor literature works against a common-sense understanding of the world that posits a universal subject or that perceives in terms of stability and identity rather than process and becoming. A minor use of language is active rather than reactive, creative rather than representational and for Deleuze it is through art (and especially literature) that the minor attains its maximum force (1980:24). And so, for Deleuze, "the aim of writing is to carry life to the state of a non-personal power" (1997:4). While Jan Erlone recedes as a lead in the second half of *Native Son*, his effect persists unabated—indeed, it increases—and Wright's changed presentation of this character accentuates a no personal power, a power that may be identified with the revolutionary energy within the minor, because Jan attempts to break the racial boundaries that separate Bigger from them; he says, "you got something there", while looking at Bigger." Did I say that right, Bigger"(1993:73), but later it seems that he has not understood the black people, because he can't support Bigger.

Jan Erlone is a shadowy figure in most of the novel. In essence he becomes a communist; Jan is Mary Dalton's

boy friend. His idealism is naive to a fault; often times, Jan's orthodoxy and reliance upon images and 'symbols' get in the way of his well-meaning attempts to produce a real change. Jan's idealism is near shattered in the wake of Mary's murder, but he comes to a facile understanding of Bigger's crime, purely in terms of Communism and racist poverty. In the end, Jan commissions his friend, Boris Max to defend Bigger.

At times, Wright-the-activist may seem nostalgic for a lost, golden age, as if he was prescribing a correspondingly naive, utopian future based on a misunderstood past. This line of attacking Wright feeds upon cynicism and a static ontology that threatens to foreclose all but the paltriest social gains. Deleuze's concept of the minor together with its ontological assumptions—will bring us nearer to the tale, complementing *Native Son*'s Marxist and psychological insights and helping us to apprehend, not patronize, Wright's idiosyncratic style. Deleuze's concept of the minor produces more intensely among the black female world, such as the mother of Bigger, Buddy and Vera, 'Ma' who is increasingly unable to support her family and she relies upon Bigger to help put food on the table. From the beginning of the novel, Ma clearly concerned that Bigger's gang involvement is prevented him from finding a respectable job that will allow him to provide for his family. She prospects the figure of an immigrant woman when the husband, male figure( here her son) is away, like a stray animal in need of food; this female solidarity can be read both in conventional terms and as a Deleuzian "other" allied against the dominant (white male) major (1986:32). In this sense, Aime J. Ellis claims that "social grouping among poor urban black males make a sense of a world filled with racial terror"(2002:24). The immigrant's fear of her son recedes enough for her. But her son, Bigger is furious about his family, because of their poverty and suffering, since he can't help them, hence he urges to kill himself or someone else. He is the result of pressure in his social position. Additionally, Elizabeth J.Ciner more over observes that "the struggle of the individual for self-possession, which is a struggle to be fully human and free, is the strongest unifying element in Wright's novel"(1988:125). As male-ness is the main point for Bigger's mother, Ma, Bigger struggles to find it with the respect to his identity.

Whereas the book's identity concerns are firmly anchored to the economic realm, the book's victims at all points of the economic spectrum can be identified as belonging to particular classes the richer or the poor, but categorization is always contingent upon economic circumstance rather than biology, ethnicity, or any kind of essentialism. We may, for instance, think of the fictional inhabitants of Bigger's house and his reign, as belonging to a tribe in the way that Deleuze and Guattari speak of the collective or 'territorial' investments that bring such groups together, that in effect define a tribe. One such investment would be that of the gun or 'gun culture'. And Bigger wish he had solidarity with other black people to overcome the white force, and he thinks of Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy, and he wishes some black leaders gather people into a group that act together "to end fear and shame".

Above all, however, it is through their relation to work and particular kinds of work that the people of black belt define themselves; this sense of identity may be misunderstood by themselves and others as an underlying identity, but in fact the connection is an example of Deleuze's understanding that relations are external to their terms. The Dedication of *Native Son* points toward a slippage of identity in siding with the "millions who were born to be farmers" but instead find themselves "herded into welfare lines, prisons, or the slavery of big business"(1994:684), an outlook that accords with Marx's understanding of "the everlasting, nature-imposed condition of human existence" (1976:179). But the novel itself undermines such idealism. If the women function as symbol and pre-figuration or foreshadowing, their silent presences also projects the 'sorrowful freedom'; this connection signals an incipient minor, a Deleuzian minority that has not yet been able to cultivate a viable cooperation. In this sense, Aime J.Ellis claims that "social grouping among poor urban black males was a strategy meant to ease psychological anxiety and to make a sense of a world filled with racial terror"(2002:24), it is for the same reason that Bigger joins the gang.

Leaping forward to the middle of book one danger is the pervasive theme, as the promise of fear begins to be realized. Despite Ma's prophetic warning, Bigger goes to Doc's pool hall to meet his gang and he suggests that they rob Blum and so he projects his rear on to Gus, another member of the gang, hoping that the argument will prevent the gang from organizing themselves to attempt the heist. Bigger suggests the robbery, because he wants to appear tough, but when Gus calls his action as bluff, Bigger gets angry and pulls a knife. The stir that Bigger causes does more than prevent the gang from robbing Blum's; Bigger's raucous behavior gets him thrown out of Doc's pool hall, "gang-out" spot of gang, he will no longer be able to participate especially considering the fact that none of his friends were willing to defend his violent behavior, and it produces the sense of lost identity in him. Accident and disaster and loss, cycles of pain and violence such elements permeate the chapter two.

One might argue that the fear described here is strictly an outcome of narrative insofar as it seems attached to plot and character; one might also see these instances of fear as straightforward literary foreshadowing, as strategic moments of suspense and the quest of identity. By reorienting ourselves to perceive fear or another affect as an

incorporeal body that preexists subjects and acts through them, we practice that double vision whereby, for instance, the subject (or character) is noted as a conventional marker yet ontologically denied, because one's identity is lost. Wright certainly employs fear to generate suspense, but suspense itself works via affects that circulate independently, or pass through, a novel's characters. Indeed, the production of fear-as-affect, along with other affects, might most readily be sensed at those moments in the novel when supporting characters are featured or peripheral incidents occur, since at such moments readers are less prone to neatly assign emotions and events in terms of fixed subject positions or a particular narrative grid. This fact is apparent in Mary's behavior toward Bigger, while she secretly meet her boy friend, Jan and they insist on eating at a black restaurant, and the apartment buildings in the black district, when Jan declares we will own everything one day and that eventually there will be no black or white and Mary says, "they are human...they live in our country...in the same city with us.."in this sense, Elizabeth J.Ciner says, "Black males are perpetually boys in the eyes of the Man"(1988:127). Bigger resents Mary and Jan, because they force his identity into confusion, he says:"at that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate"(1993:67), because they degraded him.

Of course, the characters' fear is also related to specific objects: a ruthless supervisor, a sexual predator, an out-of-state corporation. In the case of the corporation, however, one notes a drifting away from the specific; the object to be feared here is already nebulous, lacking a villainous agent at whom one can readily point. In this case, that is, the feared object is understood and articulated by Wright's characters, a placeholder for the disembodied, abstract reality. As in Marx's concept of the commodity fetish, agents have been eclipsed by categories; while agents are always locatable behind each category, the system itself ensures the endless replace ability of each agent. It is a system that has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation (1978:475).

In Chicago's black South side, this exploitation takes the form of a shifting mode of production that has violently disorienting consequences for public and private lives. The effect is all-pervasive, for, as Marx argues, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their beings, but, on the contrary, their social beings determine their consciousness" (1970:4). Wright's some of characters have lost their bearings. This alien, amorphous economic exploitation has clouded so many of their previously held assumptions, exposing them to a new kind of vulnerability and effectively dispelling their identities. They have become radically displaced: exiled in their own territory, adrift in a landscape insufficiently populated by discernible subjects and objects, existing in a seemingly paradoxical condition of collective abjection. As Kristeva writes:

*To be sure, if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me. That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an effect and not yet a sign(1972:10).*

We are introduced to other characters in the book one; such as Mary Dalton and her parents. She is the daughter and heiress of Daltons. After spending an evening with her boy friend, Jan who is communist, Mary passes out in a drunken stupor, as Bigger is trying to help the drunken give to bed before her parents realize her misbehavior. Terrified of the consequences if he is discovered in Mary's room, Bigger claps a pillow over the girl's face to keep her from answering her mother's calls. In the process, Bigger accidentally kills Mary, suffocating her with a pillow. This crime can be approved as a sign that Bigger as a hired chauffeur in the white world be saved, but her disappearance produces the suspensions, after this Bigger decapitates Mary and burns her body in the basement furnace, and while all characters are skeptical to him, he tells an artificial story, mentioning "a gentleman" came to the Dalton's house the night before, this gentleman is himself that gains the fictional identity in the white dominated world, but her left white bones reveal Bigger's crime. We first see Mr. Dalton as a tall white haired man, who hires Bigger as a chauffeur, he is owner of the South Side Real Estate Company, he is a great supporter of NAACP, the national association for the advancement of colored people, but it becomes clear that he has little understanding of racism and poverty. The wife of Mr. Dalton and the mother of Mary, Mrs. Dalton is physically blind and her face and hair are so white that Bigger thinks she is a ghost. The wealth of Dalton family is hers, she hopes that Bigger like her previous chauffeur will go the night school and gain the identity, and Bigger's attempt to find a job in Dalton's territory is representation of a black man's quest of identity, but the white-dominated society which is manifested by Dalton's white hair, Mrs. Dalton's blindness, and finally the white left burnt bones of Mary stop him to gain the identity in such society. Even the last snowing scene of burning Mary provides the same message, "It is snowing heavily and he lands hard, the snow filling his mouth, eyes and ears"(1993:73). Joko Sengova adds that "Bigger's characterization appears to involve a distinct construct which is an almost parabolic dossier of multiple personalities" (1997:332) which in fact, are the results of lost identity, because at the beginning of novel , we

see Bigger as a black man in the quest of his lost identity, then he turns to a robber of the white man, Blum though it is not possible, since it means a battle against whole white world, and it is not along with gaining identity, therefore he tries 'a fool chance', it is to find a job in the Dalton's mansion as a chauffeur, finally he appears as Mary's murderer, and he tells an artificial story to a private investigator that "a gentle man" entered Mary's room at the night before. At the end of book two, we see Bigger who feels a new power, a sense of wholeness, but he awakes in the morning while the city has been covered by snow. As a symbol, the snow is a sign of omnipresence of white world, because Bigger has aroused their fear. As wrenching as the characters' object-related fear is, then, their free-floating fear should be understood as even more significant, for this is where the novel's political and psychological acuity and its affective power most resides.

The entirety of book one and two can be read in terms of its affective power. These chapters have given way to out-of-state owners who run things from afar, making life a welter of loss and confusion for black south side residents. Late capitalism's disastrous effects upon black belt was becoming evident earlier in the book; and Wright gives us the monstrous fruition of capitalism in the second half of the novel.

The next section presents a frightened visitor, who we soon realize is whole white world, and we learn, Bigger quit his job because he has been found to kill Mary Dalton and Bigger's girl friend, Bessie Mears who reluctantly dragged in to Bigger's criminal activity. Despite her alcoholism and general apathy, she is prophetic when she warns Bigger that his violent crimes inevitably cost him his life, but Bigger feels pride in thinking that one day he will publicly accept what he has done, he believes that Jan and Mary are too blind to him and his family, and Mary's murder is justified by fear that white have caused him, he thinks, they are not really people, instead they are 'a great natural force', in this respect, we'll come to the fact that he is going to find the identity in the White world. But it is not possible, such approaches depersonalize Bigger's new identity and the depersonalization continues in the novel, as a result the move to Wright's disorienting use of free indirect discourse.

For the entire novel, a point to which we will return, first, though, note how the affect of fear inhabits the scenes of novel. As we have seen, this affect recurs throughout the novel as an intensive pulsation: fear is felt as a potentiality and as an incorporeal presence. Wright's style is complementary. The language itself is not a dialect but a 'foreign' language within the major language, with regional intonations, neologisms, an estranging use of capitalization, and a frequency of clipped, arid expressions: NAACP.

As a result, the move into this point of view contributes to Wright's disorienting use of free indirect discourse. Here, readers share the victim's point of view, but this perspective somehow feels impersonal since we do not know him and this impersonality, or detachment, is compounded by Bigger's own disorientation and by the fact that Dalton's are themselves depersonalized, the authority figures which, in turn, do not really acknowledge Bigger as a person. They are uninterested in his immobility. Sengova observes that "immovable social barriers faced by Bigger force him to think he is merely no man and nothing else"(1997:332). These social barriers even appear in the form of physical, real barriers in Bigger's first Dalton's meeting, while Bigger searches how he enters Dalton's house at the front or the back of the house, but Mr. Dalton let him enter at the front door, and it is a sign to approve him as a supporter of colored people, but Bigger wondered at 'the splendor of the home, with its elegant furnishing and painting', hence he feels intimidated by the vast difference between this world and his world and he abounds with insecurity and fear. Because the reconciliation of these two worlds is not possible.

### 3. Conclusion

The political configurations of white world combine a certain obscurantism and irrationalism with a hyper technical conclusion that whiteness will triumph amid an euphoria of racialism. The sovereignty of white world leads to crises of identity among the blacks, because they have disoriented and depersonalized. Among typical of Wright's free indirect discourse and of the depersonalized presentation of characters we get his point of view in fragments. Many of the details that accompany the scene contribute to an overall fragmented texture in which point of view is ambiguous, it shows the dubious quality which is haunted in such society. Together, these manifestations of minor style engender in a central field that de-emphasizes fixed subjects in favor of ontology of process and connections among characters and community, thus allowing for an especially forceful presence of affects the disorderliness and depressions work on the quest of identity, as we have argued before. And by writing in terms of collective investments rather than fixed identity, Wright makes clear the ties between the many forms of aggression and Bigger's mystified economic circumstances, while avoiding a sentimentality that would undermine the novel. The world in this sense is the world dominated by an instinct toward death and destruction and provides the same message that we live on a world which is full and without space. Of course, this method also ensures that reading *Native Son* will be, at least in part, a painful, almost suffocating

experience, as it has been revealed in this essay too.

## References

- Adorno, Theodor W. (1973). *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Bateson, Gregory. (2000). *Steps To an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Butler, Robert James. (1986). *The Function of Violence in Richard's Wright's Native Son*. Black American Literature Forum 20.
- Ciner, Elizabeth J. (1988). *Richard Wright's Struggles With Fathers*. New York: Gerald Publishing.
- Deleuze, Gilles. (1986). *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. (1975). *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ellis, Aime J. (2002). *Where is Bigger's Humanity? Black Male Community in Richard's Wright's Native Son*. ANQ15.3.
- Elias, Norbert. (2000). *The Civilizing Process*. Revised edition. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Jameson, Frederic. (1978). *The Symbolic Inference: or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis*. Critical Inquiry 4.3
- Lukács, Georg. (1971). *History and Class Consciousness*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Marx, Karl. (1976). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. 2 vols. Trans. Ben Fowkes. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. (1978). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Sengova, Joko. (1997). *Native Identity and Alienation in Richard Wright's Native Son and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Cross-Cultural Analysis*. Mississippi Quarterly 50.2.
- Wright, Richard. (1993). *Native Son*. New York: Perennial Classics.