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Exploring Racial Lines and Boundaries in the Twentieth Century: A Review of *Native Son* by Richard Wright

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Abstract

While slavery was eventually abolished, the oppression of Black Americans continued under the sharecropping system, Jim Crow, the constant threat of lynching, and other forms of brutality. This history of oppression in the southern region of the United States forced many African Americans to move northward to places like Chicago, New York and Detroit to have what they thought would be a new beginning. This was found not to be true. With a competitive labor force, institutionalized racism, and difficulty finding work, the black population experienced a surplus of poverty, and African American families were torn apart. This essay emerges from Sociology 2060: Race and Ethnic Relations, a course which used a book club approach to explore the novel *Native Son* by Richard Wright. Instead of relying solely on academic textbooks and scholarly journal articles, students read and engaged the *Native Son* text. Students used the text to analyze race related themes and concepts. In this essay, I use key excerpts from the *Native Son* text to discuss and explore two major race related themes: racial identity and white privilege. Specifically, I examine how racial identity and white privilege can be used to understand the racial environment of Chicago in the 1930s. I also show how the two concepts shaped the experiences of Bigger Thomas, the novel's protagonist.

Key Terms:

- The Great Migration
- Racial Identity
- *Native Son*
- White Privilege

Introduction

During the early twentieth century, America witnessed a demographic shift where Blacks moved away from the rural south to urban spaces like Chicago, IL. Those who participated in this migration to the north relished the absence of Jim Crow laws and the oppressive nature of life in the south. However, the move to the north, or participating in the Great Migration, did not equate to the absence of racial discrimination and barriers. Often believed to be the “promise land,” urban spaces like Chicago still presented challenges of equality and freedom for Blacks in the early twentieth century. Employment and housing continued to be limited by systematic racism. Racially restrictive covenants helped to create “Negro slum districts” that were characterized by low levels of education, concentrated poverty and high infant mortality rates (Jones-Correa, 2001). Even though Blacks moved to the north for better economic opportunities, their opportunities remained quite limited. Black women who moved to the north during the great migration were reduced to domestic service because they were often excluded from factory and clerical work. Moreover, employers would only hire black males when they thought work was unsuitable for whites (Franklin, 1997).

Described as one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century, Richard Wright’s work is known for tackling issues of race, racial identity and the outcomes of living in a racist society. His novel *Native Son* tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young man dealing with the struggles of being poor and black on the south side of Chicago in the 1930s. Although *Native Son* is a work of fiction, the book provides insight into what life was like for Blacks in Chicago during the 1930s. The population in the north, especially in places like Chicago, changed drastically from 40,000 in 1910 to

278,000 in 1940 (Franklin, 1997). Just like most black people during that time, Bigger’s opportunities were limited by the racial barriers and constraints of society. Because the novel takes place in Chicago during the twentieth century, we are able to see how racism impacted housing, employment and social opportunities of Blacks during this era (Franklin, 1997).

Native Son tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old African American male. Having grown up in an era of harsh racial prejudice, Bigger is burdened with the fact that he has no control over his life and that he has nothing to look forward to or aspire for. His mother harasses him to find a job and make something of himself, but instead Bigger constantly gets in trouble with his friends, hangs out at pool halls, and partakes in different robberies. Bigger and his friends have committed many petty robberies of black owned businesses, but have never found the courage to rob a white business.

Anxiety, frustration and rage define Bigger’s daily existence. Left with no other options, Bigger takes a job as a chauffeur for the Daltons, a rich white family who coincidentally own the apartment complex in which Bigger and his family live. Mary, Mr. Dalton’s daughter, ignores the social limits and boundaries between white women and black men, which angers and worries Bigger. Mary insists that Bigger take a ride with her and her communist boyfriend, Jan. Persistent to prove their understanding of the black race, Mary and Jan force Bigger to take them to an all-black restaurant on Chicago’s south side. Bigger feels very embarrassed and uncomfortable, but his fear for the white race will not let him object to their request. They order drinks, and the three of them end up drunk. Bigger takes Mary home to her room and kisses her on the lips. He is almost caught, and in a panic he tries to quiet Mary, accidentally suffocating her to death. Bigger feels an overwhelming feeling of guilt at first, but then

starts to feel a sense of accomplishment. Mary's murder gives Bigger a foreign sense of power and identity.

The white authorities use Bigger's crime as an excuse to terrorize all other African Americans and the entire South Side of Chicago. Bigger is eventually caught and tried for murder. Max, Bigger's public defender tries to save him from the death penalty by stating that even though Bigger is guilty, he is only a product of his environment. Max urges the court that there will be more young men like Bigger if America does not put an end to the vicious cycle of hatred and vengeance. Despite Max's plea, Bigger is sentenced to death.

The daily experience of the novel's protagonist provides an opportunity to explore themes such as white privilege, oppression, and stereotypes. In this essay, I will explore how Richard Wright's *Native Son* can be used to broaden our understanding of two key concepts connected to the enduring legacy of racial stratification in the United States. These two important themes are the idea of racial identity and white privilege. From the black perspective, racial identity is the struggle to come into, understand, and accept one's self in a society that is based off of white principles (Johnson, 2002). White privilege is a theory on racial inequalities that focuses on the advantages that white people accrue from society compared to the disadvantages that people of color experience (Randall, 2010).

Racial Identity

Race is a very difficult concept to define. However, many sociologists see it as a social construction. "This means that race is created and sustained not by science but by historical, social and political processes" (Omni and Winant, 1986, p. 5). In the United States race is a matter of social definitions and traditions that we create through our social interactions. These may include

interactions we have in social institutes such as schools, coffee shops, or convenience stores or more personal interactions such as the ones we have in our homes with our families. Although race is a social construction, it remains an important feature in our society. Along with gender, it is one of the first things that people are likely to notice about one another. Race is also one of the ways that people might identify themselves. Racial identity relates to the understanding people hold about "who they are and what is meaningful to them" (Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum, 2007, p. 275). Racial identity is the way people decide to identify with which ever race they claim, whether that is negative or positive. When people decide how they racially identify, they then must decide what that means to themselves. For some African Americans or black Americans, that may mean adopting certain cultures, foods, music, religious practices, and dialect.

For centuries, African Americans have been taught to hate themselves as well as others of the same race so it has taken an extensive time to find something of which they were really proud. However, while this pride was formulating so was a never-ending cycle of doubt and confusion, and a sense of internal and external hate among the black race. When people are taught that their race is inferior and less than human, it tends to make them reject that particular race. Being black in many cases is not a choice and because of the oppression blacks have endured over time, many people are left with a low sense of racial identity.

The Black racial identity development theory by William Cross explains the processes by which "Black people develop a healthy sense of themselves as racial beings and of their Blackness in a toxic sociopolitical environment" (Tatum, 1992, p. 5). As Vandiver, et al. explain, "The Cross model, in toto or in part, has been the primary means of investigating racial identity in the counseling and psychotherapy process" (2002, p.71). The model includes five steps: pre-

encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization/commitment (Tatum, 1992). Pre-encounter is the feeling that “white is right,” best exhibited when a person tries to live a life modeled after “white” ideals and customs. The encounter stage is when something takes place in a person’s life that makes he/she question the initial “white is right” notion, most commonly a negative racial encounter with the opposite race. For example, a black man or woman may not be hired for a job that he or she is qualified for because of race. The immersion/emersion stage is when people wish to only surround themselves with individuals of their own race, avoiding any interaction with white people. When people get to the internalization stage, they are willing to interact with white people and possibly create relationships with them, but tend to remain conscious and acknowledge self-definition. Once the internalization/commitment stage is reached, individuals have accepted their place in society as black people, however still recognize the presence and power of their white counterparts. Sadly, there are many who never reach this stage and are trapped somewhere in the middle.

When people have low racial identity development, they have low confidence and self-worth which results in hatred for their own race as well as the white race. In most cases, people don’t hate being black. They have pride in their culture; however, they hate and resent the burdens that come with the color of their skin. Johnson states that racial identity starts in one’s childhood or early adulthood, with people like mothers, fathers, or pastors contributing to the structure of one’s racial identity (Johnson, 2002). In many cases, people have parents who don’t feel good about themselves or who are struggling with their own racial identity, so it is difficult to teach their children self-worth and how to find their place in society.

As the Cross Model suggests, your interactions, environment and experiences also contribute to your racial identity. People who grow up impoverished and those who are raised in well-off situations are going to have two different racial identities. When your reality is an all-black neighborhood with middle to upper class families, and you have very little to no interaction with white people, you do not resent being black because you view your race positively. People with this upbringing are usually placed in the immersion/emersion stage because they see life in an all-black world as fine the way it is, and don’t harbor any negative feelings towards whites (Vandiver, et al., 2002). In contrast, when every black person you come in contact with is impoverished, while every white person you encounter appears to be well off, you will start to hate your circumstances and eventually your race. The way you racially identify can have an impact, whether positive or negative, on your mental health and quality of life (Johnson, 2002). These health behaviors can include stress, depression, and physical illness. It is difficult to reach the internalization/commitment stage of racial identity development when there are constant reminders that you are inferior, and when you feel that there is nothing good that can come from interacting with the opposite race.

In *Native Son*, we see that Bigger is struggling with his identity as a black man. Bigger struggles with his racial identity because he lives in a society where “white is right,” and there isn’t any place for diversity. He is very angry and continues to speak negatively about whites: “Them white boys sure can fly,” Gus said. “Yeah,” Bigger said, wistfully. “They get a chance to do everything” (Wright, 1940, p. 16). Bigger displays a sort of “white is right” attitude as he and his friend Gus “play white” one afternoon. Bigger and Gus pretend to be men in power, such as the President of the United States and Secretary of State, and imagine a conversation between the two of them (Wright, 1940, p.18). Bigger and Gus

know they would never hold positions like this because of the color of their skin, and even though they appear to have an outer hatred for white people, it is apparent they envy them and wonder what it would be like to be white. Any person who wonders what it is like to be a part of another race, is not fully connecting with their own race and may start to resent their position in society. This shows that Bigger is trapped somewhere in the immersion/emersion stage because he only wishes to stay in his own neighborhood and fantasize about how other people live instead of exploring it for himself.

It is clear that Bigger feels like the most important thing about himself above anything else is his race. He hasn't yet accepted the fact that he is a black male in the 1930s and exactly what that entails. He hates being black and hates white people for simply being white; feelings about race fuel all of his actions. Bigger cannot see past color long enough to have healthy relationships with family and friends or to help better his family's situation. The only thing he thinks about is how bad his life is because of his race: "He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin" (Wright, 1940, p. 67). Bigger didn't see himself as a person. He didn't feel that he had his whole life ahead of him or that anything positive could come from his life because of his race.

Being black cripples Bigger before he even has the chance to live. In *Native Son* we can see how Bigger hates himself and every other black face he sees. Bigger says that he "hated this room and all the people in it, including himself" (Wright, 1940, p. 106). He then goes on to ask himself questions regarding his family's living conditions such as what they had ever done and why he and his folks have to live that way. He feels that black is wrong, but never understands why, and feels that the oppression of his race is a personal attack on him. Because of his fears and

mixed emotions about being a black man working for an all-white family, Bigger commits a heinous murder, smothering, beheading and then burning his boss's young daughter. After meeting Max, his public defender, Bigger begins to transition through the stages of Cross's Black racial identity model. Max is the only person Bigger has ever confided in, which is surprising because he is white. Max shows Bigger that white people are people too, not gods or demons like he once thought. Even after meeting Max, Bigger feels that being black means you have no voice and no purpose in a white society. Max asks Bigger if he raped Mary, and Bigger says, "Naw. But everybody'll say I did. What's the use? I'm black. They say black men do that. So it don't matter if I did or if I didn't" (Wright, 1940, p. 349). Bigger feels defeated because of the pressures and stress that come along with being a young black male.

Bigger never gets a chance to live a life where he doesn't have to worry about his race. Just as Bigger is beginning to reach a place where he can positively identify with his race and accept his position in society, his life is snatched from him. Being found guilty of murder and receiving the death penalty is the worst yet best thing that could have happened to Bigger. It is only then that he sees beyond color and feels a sense of contentment with being a black male.

White Privilege

White privilege is another theme that can be observed in *Native Son*. White privilege is defined as "a right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others; an exemption in many particular cases from certain burdens or liabilities" (Randall, 2010, p. 1). In other words, white privileges are certain advantages white Americans have over other races that are given to them based solely on the color of their skin. White privilege further reinforces racial inequalities by focusing on the many advantages that white

people have accumulated from society over time in contrast to the many disadvantages that people of color experience.

In Peggy McIntosh's article *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, she defines white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 1). She then talks about her perspective on racism, explaining that as a white woman she was taught to look at racism as a disadvantage for others but not as an advantage for herself. She compares the idea of white privilege to the privileges that males have over females. These are privileges that both males and white Americans would like to ignore, but sometimes don't even recognize. Elizabeth Minnich explains, "whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (1988, p.1).

McIntosh lists a series of privileges of which the white American or even the minority may be unaware. She lists an advantage in the housing market with the opportunity to live anywhere she wants without giving it a second thought and an advantage in the workplace knowing that when she goes to work or asks to speak the person in charge, she will be faced with someone of her own race. One more subtle privilege is that blemish cover ups and bandages are made in flesh tone colors to better match white skin (McIntosh, 1988). This is a prime example of something that people do not give much thought to, but gives the impression that "white is still right."

Tim Wise defines white privilege in *Between Barack and a Hard Place* as the "advantage the white Americans have not to confront just how real and how present day the idea of racism is" (Wise, 2008, p. 121). He focuses on the disadvantage that minorities experience by discussing President Barack

Obama. According to Wise, Obama's election shows us not how far Americans have come, but how much we still need to grow. Wise views Obama's election as old fashioned racism, racism that is based solely on one's skin. Wise also argues that white Americans are responsible for changing the system they have inherited because white Americans "continue to benefit, consciously or not, from the entrenched privileges that are the legacy of that system" (Wise, 2008, p. 112). He states, "White Privilege is being able to go to a prestigious prep school, then to Yale and Harvard Business School and still be seen as an 'average guy,' while being black, going to a prestigious prep school, then Occidental College, then Columbia, and then Harvard Law, makes you 'uppity' and a snob who probably looks down on regular folks" (Wise, 2008, p. 112). This statement shows that blacks have to work twice as hard to be even put in the same category as whites, who are only doing what they have been told is normal everyday life for them. While McIntosh and Wise present the topic in two different ways, both agree that blacks and whites in America face two different realities, and both emphasize how easy it is for white people to ignore the role privilege plays in their lives.

Race and social policy are often intertwined. In the early twentieth century several policies helped to promote white privilege. For example, the intention of the Social Security Act of 1935 was to provide long-term economic stability and promote a sense of economic security for the aged, the unemployed, and the disabled. However, the Social Security Act did little to benefit African Americans (Davis, 2005). Instead it excluded them by putting restrictions on who could and could not qualify for Social Security. Most African American women, who worked in fields such as education, agriculture, and domestic services, did not qualify for benefits (Davis, 2005). Another social policy with racial implications was the Wagner Act of 1935. The policy was originally designed to protect African

Americans against discrimination in labor unions but was petitioned against and eventually dropped (Powell, 2003). The change in the policy allowed labor unions to dominate and monopolize the labor force and made discrimination against minorities legal. This gave the people in power, who were white, the authority to decide who they wanted working in the unions, making it impossible for African Americans to acquire union protection and benefits such as medical care, full employment, and job security (Powell, 2003).

Restrictive covenants were also put into place to keep African Americans out of certain neighborhoods. Racial restrictive covenants were legally binding covenants or contracts that restricted homeowners from selling, leasing or renting their homes to Asian Americans, Jews or Blacks (Franklin, 1997; Jones-Correa, 2001). If an owner violated this covenant they risked their property being foreclosed on or seized by the bank (Jones-Correa, 2001). Restrictive covenants prevented blacks from owning property and kept blacks in a small area of the cities that were in most cases the slum, giving them no opportunity to better themselves and their living situations. These two policies show that race was not only a social construct, but a political one as well that meant black Americans were dealing with oppression in both arenas.

The manifestations of such policies are indeed present in *Native Son*. The most obvious example of this white privilege is in the living arrangements of blacks and whites in Chicago. Even though whites and blacks in *Native Son* lived fairly close to each other, Wright shows the reader that there is an obvious color line that divides the two worlds. Mr. Dalton, for example, owns the South Side Real Estate Company that rents to Bigger and his family, but he has no interaction with them what so ever. When Bigger first comes to work for the Daltons, Mr. Dalton questions Bigger about his living situation. “You live at 3721 Indiana? Where do you pay rent? How much

rent do you pay? For how many rooms” (Wright, 1940: p. 49)? One of the privileges of being white during that time was being able to choose if you wanted to have any interaction with blacks, and most whites chose not to. Mr. Dalton doesn’t even know the details of his own property because as a white person he has the privilege of not having any contact with blacks or those who don’t resemble him. Bigger, on the other hand, doesn’t have a choice whether to interact with whites or not. If he wants a good job that will allow him to better himself, he not only has to interact with whites, but this interaction must be characterized with subservience.

We see this idea of white privilege again when the character of Jan, a young communist, is introduced to us. Jan and his girlfriend Mary ride around in a car with Bigger while he sits in between them, nervous and uneasy. Jan is completely oblivious to the fact that even though he is comfortable being around Bigger, Bigger isn’t allowed to be relaxed or comfortable in the same situation. As a black man in the 1930s, Bigger must follow a certain social etiquette. This etiquette requires Bigger to only refer to Jan as “Mr.” and “sir.” When Jan shakes Bigger’s hand and tells him not to call him “sir,” Bigger is put in an awkward position because that’s the way he has been socialized to interact with white people. Yet, Mary and Jan have the “privilege” of driving around a black neighborhood and not feeling scared or thinking they are going to be harassed. They don’t think twice about going to an all-black diner in an all-black neighborhood. “Look, Bigger. We want one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places” (Wright, 1940, p. 69). Bigger and his friends never could have decided that they wanted to eat at an all-white restaurant. Knowing this, it never crosses Bigger’s mind to go into the dinner and eat with them: “I – I... I don’t want to go in...” (Wright, 1940, p. 71). Bigger even feels uncomfortable eating with white folks in his own surroundings. Once inside, Mary and Jane eat and drink without interruption.

They don't have to deal with stares from Blacks. They don't have to enter through the back door or sit by the kitchen, and they are not mistreated. Social norms were different in the 1930s for black and whites and the characters Mary and Jan are able to take those differences for granted because of white privilege.

Richard Wright wrote *Native Son* in 1940. While the author's purpose was to take us through the life of Bigger Thomas and his struggle to find himself, we are still able to uncover other key concepts such as racial identity and white privilege in the text. Racism is a key concept that needs to be explored because it doesn't affect just one group of people, but society as a whole. "While the impact of racism on whites is clearly different from its impact on people of color, racism has a negative ramification for everyone" (Tatum, 1992, p. 3).

Comparing the definition of white privilege to the way it is displayed in *Native Son* shows a complete disregard and sometimes abuse for the things that white people can do that other races have to think twice about. Society has allowed it to be easier to be white opposed to any other race. We have been socialized to be content with white privilege, and with this socialization come a battle to accept any race that is not white, which makes it difficult for minorities to accept themselves. Moving up and down the racial identity development scale, Black Americans search for this acceptance and equality, but many never receive it.

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas doesn't reach the internalization/commitment stage until the very last lines of the book. Instead of having a negative encounter with the white race open his eyes, he finally has a positive one with his lawyer Max. Finally, Bigger is able to accept his place in society and be content with his role as a black male. He goes from the immersion/emersion stage, where he is very uncomfortable interacting with

the white race and trying to avoid them at all costs, to only confiding in a white male. The time period in which Wright wrote this novel is different than the twenty-first century, however we still see similar problems today. Bigger represents many blacks not only in the 1930s, but in current times who struggle with racial identity.

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