RACIAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY OF BLACK AMERICAN EXPATRIATES IN FRANCE: A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF RICHARD WRIGHT, JAMES BALDWIN, AND WILLIAM GARDNER SMITH, 1936-1970

by

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This thesis aims to construct a conception of the black American identity within the context of the works of three expatriate authors living in France during the 1940-1950's. By examining the thematic links among three novels each of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and William Gardner Smith, I have established each authors outlook on racial conflicts during a time period of significant tension and progress. These three authors have been chosen because each spent a significant time exiled from America, yet remained active in race politics back home. My analysis is aimed at determining each authors' concepts of: the black American identity both at-home and internationally; the connection between black American expatriates and their home nation; and the role of black Americans within the United States. Although each author follows a different racial ideology, they all present different facets of the same struggle

for identity and self-assertion. Wright, Baldwin, and Smith each explore the inheritance of black American history and its effect upon American citizens, and present a worldview tempered by the cynicism that has formed during centuries of oppression. These authors support the resistance against the white power systems which have perpetuated this oppression, but with a realistic view of the repercussions of racial conflict. These three authors establish the black American identity as a state of being both inside and outside one's homeland, deeply rooted in American culture but exiled from real citizenship. Expatriation has enabled these authors to examine the international bonds between black Americans and other oppressed peoples, leading each to assert that those who are cognizant of these racial issues around the world have an obligation to fight for freedom and for the right to exist within one's home country.

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Introduction

The United States and France have a long history of cooperation and interdependence that has established a strong intellectual relationship since the colonization of North America. France has been seen as an emblem of democracy and cultural richness, shining its light over the entire western world. It is in pursuit of this gloriously romantic image that many Americans have traveled to France, hoping to find there an epicenter of artistic creation and the source of all good things. Americans have traveled to France for a worldly education and to instigate a cultural exchange—often upon coming of age—that enables a mutual artistic and intellectual influence. However, within this American tradition is another, more specific custom. France has been a destination for black Americans to travel and move since the slavery era. Although France did not abolish slavery much earlier than the United States, it was still perceived to be a site of racial and cultural openness by runaway slaves and free blacks alike. Expatriation to France and other European countries became a form of protest for those who sought refuge from restrictive American racism. This image of the land of social freedom was reiterated and confirmed by black American veterans returning from both WWI and WWII. These military men found a previously unknown autonomy while abroad—they were treated as Americans, free to act as men and to expect respect as such. Many of these black Americans chose to stay abroad and enjoy a life without American-style racism suppressing their every move. Those who did return to the States awoke to the real differences in the quality of life and in the attitudes of white people back home. They spoke of their experiences, spreading word of the racial haven in France to the black American community, and often ended up returning to stay.

In this manner, the reputation of France as a country free of racism spread among the black community, encouraged by generations of white and black Americans who had found a new way of life there. Many traveled to France for educational opportunities, both as students and as already well-reputed intellectuals, artists, and authors. Some made the move in search of artistic freedom out from under the censorship and suspicion of mid-twentieth century America. Accepted fully into the artistic community in France, minority artists (both racial and political) found that they could look back at their home culture and understand and criticize it more freely than from within. Still others came simply to escape the burden of daily racism and enjoy the privilege of a peaceful civilian life away from the war zone of bigotry. Those who expatriated were reacting against hostility at home, born of a strenuous period in American history.

This project focuses on the writings of African-American expatriates during the 1940's and 1950's because these decades were witness to a huge amount of social and cultural shifts in both the United States and France. This time period is just previous to the full swing of the civil rights movement, allowing an examination of the underlying pressures and policies within American culture that eventually developed into explosive racial conflict. I will also be able to trace how the works of the three authors, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and William Gardner Smith, contribute to the race rhetoric surrounding the later civil rights movements and development of political ideologies within the movement. This era of American history is also fraught with institutional racism which was on the verge of imploding. The Jim Crow system in the South surrounded black Americans with danger, robbing them of rights and corrupting justice

systems to allow for total white control. The ghettoes of the North trapped blacks within cycles of poverty and crime, preventing any upward advancement with glass ceilings. The fifties were host to the McCarthy era of unfair prosecution of Communists or suspected members of the Party, who often worked with the black community to address shared social problems. This era further restricted the political freedom of black Americans and sowed distrust among citizens. The forties saw the beginning of the decolonization of the French Union, as a series of demonstrations and violent government repression began in many of their colonies. This process destabilized the power system in France and led to a resurgence of racism towards the citizens of these colonies. The 1940's and 1950's is an extremely important era for the development of the civil rights movement, and the writings within this time period reflect the three authors' reactions to the cultural and social shifts around them.

This study aims to uncover how Wright, Baldwin, and Smith have conceptualized the black American identity within their historical moment, and what it means to be a black American expatriate. I have examined nine novels by these three authors in order to construct a racial, cultural, and political perspective for each author on the issue of the black American experience both abroad and at home. Because each of these authors chose to expatriate himsef either for a significant amount of time or permanently in France, they have a unique frame of reference from which to portray the complex relationship between America and its black citizens. Although Wright, Baldwin, and Smith chose to leave the United States, their writings were immensely important to the rhetoric of the civil rights movement, and helped to define the experience of 'blackness' within the Western world.

As expatriate authors, these three men must consider a wide variety of contexts in their exploration and depiction of the black American experience. In works depicting expatriate characters in France, there are particular problems facing both white and black Americans. France has an extensive history as a colonial power, and thus an extensive history of racism directed towards the colonized 'citizens'. Although France is depicted as a safe haven for black American characters, they are witnesses to the hypocritical treatment of colonized peoples within France. Black Americans in particular face guilty feelings because they recognize the common oppression between these colonies and the black community in the States, but are restricted by French policy of the time which expels any foreigner who becomes involved in French politics. As Americans, the expatriate characters in these novels must also come to terms with outside judgement from fellow Americans and from French citizens. The French characters have many associations and conceptions of American life, often tied to race or infamous regional reputations. The Americans who have relationships or friendships with the French must reckon with these interpretations of their national identity, by either rejecting or accepting them as part of their personal identity. Black Americans specifically must also deal with the racist habits of their fellow countrymen in France, who wish to reassert the American racial hierarchy while abroad. The black American expatriate characters can never fully leave behind their ties to the racial struggle at home. Even if they have followed an escapist dream to France, the relief of daily freedom does not always outweigh the guilty sense of responsibility which pressures them to support and act within the developing civil rights movements. While all

American characters must redefine their relationships to their home country, the black American characters have the added consideration of a sense of racial obligation.

In exploring the American identity both in-country and abroad, all three authors have invoked a particular sense of liminality. Wright, Baldwin, and Smith's characters are each outsiders in some way, yet still deeply rooted to their national identity and history. They participate in the American zeitgeist, but are also carefully distanced from it. Expatriate characters are more explicitly insiders and outsiders, because they gain a new viewpoint of their homeland when they are away from its pressures. Although some black American characters exile themselves intending to escape all racial concerns, others find a new model of racial coexistence in France and return home to join the struggle. Black Americans within these novels face rejection from and connection to a number of identities and nationalities, and must explore their possibilities in order to leave behind the indecision within their sense of self. Although born in America, many black characters do not feel that they belong there: they are instead members of a sub-country, oppressed within a nation that denies them rights and dignity of life. Segregation from white society (and its socioeconomic and cultural repercussions) encourages some of these black Americans to attempt to discover where they fit in in the world. Expatriation to Europe may offer the good life, but it requires the sacrifice of Americanness and of involvement in racial progress movements. Africa carries the connotation of the motherland, a long-lost oasis of black majority. However, the historical erasure of African and black history has distanced African-Americans from Africa, leading to idealization or to a complete rejection of a plan to return.

Black Americans are westerners, and so must search for—or fight for—a compromise of nationality and race which enables them to thrive. These three authors acknowledge this process by exploring the perceived possible outcomes of this struggle: assimilation into white culture; remaining a separate and oppressed minority; and black nationalism. Is it possible to make a space for themselves in America? An economic, cultural, and physical space within the majority culture? Each authors' answers to these questions reveals their personal definition of the black American identity, the significance of their personal expatriatism, and the implications of expatriatism for both black and white Americans.

Chapter 1: Richard Wright

Richard Wright is arguably the most notable author of the expatriate community during the 1940's and 1950's, and was extremely influential to a generation of black authors and American expatriates, including the other two authors of this study, James Baldwin and William Gardner Smith. Wright's works were deeply controversial pieces which explored the complex aspects of the 'Negro Problem' in America, often centering around bold portrayals of vicious racial violence. He was attracted to France as a mythic site of equality as told by "black World War I veterans" (Fabre 175), as well as for the literary heritage to be found there. Wright is an inheritor of the Harlem Renaissance-era of black expatriates, which led to some idealization of the "Old World" (175) as a site of blissful intellectualism. Delayed from visiting France by WWII, Wright spent time in Quebec instead to absorb a taste of the nearest thing until mid-1946, when he made his first visit. He arrived in a nation in transition, still reeling from the damages of war and striving to recenter itself in a new "humanist outlook" (176). Struck by the beauty of Paris, he was not immune to the gradual disillusionment that affects Americans in France. Disconcerted by living standards, shocked by attitudes towards work ethic, surprised by social differences—the usual symptoms of an American in Paris. However, since he arrived in Paris already a world-renowned author, his first visit in Paris was not the standard expatriate adventure. Wright was named a '"citizen of honor"' upon his arrival and introduced to every important intellectual, author, and politician of the era in France (177). His viewpoints as a black American man were often politicized by the French press, making him into a "spokesman for his race" (178) and used as grounds for criticism of the American system. However, Wright had not traveled to Paris to make

declarations about the race problem in America. Instead, he hoped to discover what made France so unique—it seemed to exist without the racial difficulties which plagued American society. Wright hoped to find something to bring back to the States, something to aid "the restoration of humanism to a materialism-ridden world" (178) and combat the social trends occurring in America.

But, Wright chose not to remain in America after returning from this visit. He became a resident of France in 1947, and was to remain there until his sudden death in 1960. After a taste of racial freedom in France, he could not turn back to the daily offenses and white-centric life of New York.

> After being feted as an equal by French writers and treated cordially by all the Parisians he had to deal with, he found it no longer possible to have to wonder, each time he made a move, how his white fellow citizens would take it. He decided to exile himself, he said, first to spare his children the humiliations he had undergone, then to be able to write on whatever he might choose without necessarily responding either to the racial situation or to the expectations of others. (179)

Wright craved the social and ideological independence of France for himself and his family, and could not bear to continue the life of a race-conscious man in America. In France he was an author first and foremost, an equal to other artists and free to engage in the existentialist ideology and political setting there (183). Although he distanced himself from the racial tensions of America, he could not—and indeed, did not want to—escape his ties to the race struggle back home.

Wright remained an American citizen during his entire life, but was an open critic of American policies during the McCarthy and early civil rights eras. He was an extremely public activist, and even victim of FBI investigations and CIA spying due to his past Communist activity and his criticisms of American institutional and social

racism. His status as a prominent black American expatriate author gave him a very particular perspective from which to write on these issues—"a perfect embodiment of a sort of alienation that allowed him to stand both inside and outside" (181) his subject. While his time in France allows him to distill his understanding of the "true problems" (186) in America, he was also able to gain a new perspective on the real state of race relations in France. The effects of French colonization were coming to a destructive head during this time period—the war between France and the Algerian Liberation Movement caused a new wave of racism towards Arab people. Although Wright was conflicted by the idea of assimilating Algerians as French citizens considering the struggle of black Americans to be accepted as citizens, he was struck by the evident racism towards Algerians in France. This Arab-specific racism was at odds with his image of France as the ideal civilization, but he was unable to speak out against this for fear of being expelled from the country for interfering in French politics (185). Wright did, however, become invested in another region profoundly affected by French colonialism—North and West Africa. Afro-French authors sought him out as a fellow black author, and furthered his education on negritude and the influence of African history on Western blacks. Thanks to artists and authors such as Senghor, Césaire, and Diop, Wright became active in several organizations involved in African and black artistic advancement. However, he was not a large proponent of preserving the "African cultural heritage" (191) because he felt disconnected from that heritage within the Western context. He felt that the discovery of this cultural inheritance was important, but was superseded by the "question of civil rights and desegregation" for African-Americans (192). His ideas on nationality and race inheritance are expressed in his

works, as he outlines the black American as lost in his own land, struggling to assert his right to be there and to create a space for himself.

Wright's portrayal of America is defined by the constant violence that encircles black Americans, who are forced to live in an eternal state of physical, emotional, and spiritual duress. There are not many means to escape this perpetual hell—one can submit or resist, but rarely are the options this clear. While many black Americans dream of fleeing to countries they have idealized as safe havens from the American way of life and American crimes, these dreams rarely come to fruition. These escapists reflect the chosen exile of their author, revealing a vein of hopelessness for the state of race relations within America. Every one of Wright's black characters faces the issue of survival—some capitalize on community pride and turn to political means of resistance; others mask and front to provide for themselves and their families within the white system. There is a deep sense of inevitability within Wright's body of work, for he portrays black Americans as stuck in cycles of powerlessness, often under the control of white men with god complexes, indeed under a nationwide network of such men. Under this hopelessness and violence is a strong undercurrent of communism, or "commonism," as one character puts it, the need for group action to preserve the dignity of black Americans and to fight for the right to exist. The occasional success of this perspective is merely a pinpoint of hope among the overwhelming negativity of his works. He argues that they must fight, they must demand, and even that they must die for their causes, in face of—and perhaps because of—the inevitable pain and sufferance that greets those who resist white power. The state of the American Negro as presented by Wright is bleak and nauseatingly painful, but not without hope for the future.

Section 1: *Uncle Tom's Children*

Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* is a collection of five stories aimed at depicting the reality of life for black Americans in the Deep South during the Jim Crow era. Each story centers around a single character who must survive through a trial of morality, determination, or sacrifice. The five main characters face abuse from every side of the white world which aims to suppress their wills to live and their means of survival. Each of the stories center around a particular horror of black life in this era of American history: the lynching of innocent black boys, the devaluation of black lives, rape of black women as a means to demoralize, the manipulation of and attacks against black community leaders, and the need to sacrifice one's life for the good of social progression. These themes are introduced in the opening chapter "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," in which Wright tracks his own racial education and how he learned to live under the burden of the Jim Crow system which surrounded him. In these six chapters, Wright presents the South of his childhood by pulling nauseating images out of his memory to reconstruct the repugnant setting of so many black lives. Wright so effectively depicts the revolting violence of Jim Crow that one feels implicated in the crime and victimized by the criminal. These are horrors of human creation and human enactment—they lay bare the hatred within the racist heart, and its panicked struggle to enact control and preserve its privilege. For, even in face of the most depraved acts against them, the black main characters are never completely oppressed. They are nearly drowning in the depths of hatred which surround them, but they hold on to even the smallest hope or the least bit of dignity in order to survive. Wright's characters may live in a world controlled by the most repugnant white men, but they are of a striking

resilience. They will not be dehumanized by their inhuman abusers: they will escape, they will organize, they will survive when all of their friends and family are dead, and they will die fighting. As Wright portrays them, black Americans living under Jim Crow keep their dignity and preserve their sense of right, even in the most evil of worlds.

The first chapter, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," is a first-person narrative of Wright's upbringing under the Jim Crow system and how he came to understand what life is for a black child and man in this setting. He traces his behavioral education that he received from whites, who would constantly punish him for any perceived disrespect or challenge. Even as a young child he faces disproportionate violence for unknown crimes. Simply playing in a game of 'war' with white children was dangerous, for they would increase the hazard of projectiles from cinders to glass bottles in order to win (*Uncle* 9-10). Rather than being consoled by his mother, Richard is blamed for challenging the white children and told "to be thankful to God as long as I lived that they didn't kill me" (10). This encounter is his first induction into Jim Crow protocol, but it is reinforced over and over as he grows up. Richard, along with all black Americans, must be grateful that the whites have deigned to allow their survival. For merely not saying "*sir* t'a white man" (16), he is hit with a whiskey bottle and throw off of a moving car—but he must be glad that he picked a nice man to offend, or he would be "a dead nigger now" (17). During his job at a department store, Richard watched as the store owner and his son viciously beat a black woman for her debts to the store, and then turned her over to the police for being 'drunk.' Shocked, he tells his friends the next day and they laugh, saying that "she's a lucky bitch!….Hell, it's a wonder they

didn't lay her when they got through" (16). Black people have no right to dignity, and they must submit in order to survive. Richard learns that if he "knew enough to keep his mouth shut" he might receive some "gesture of kindness" as a reward for reinforcing the white power structure (15). He cannot resist this treatment without facing a violent death, and so he must learn to play the game in order to survive—or, at least, scrape by in some semblance of survival.

Richard lives within a system which condones his degradation in every way—many of his peers are trapped by the blame of a white person, and have no recourse to resist. All blacks are presumed to be criminals, so an accusation is as good as proof. Even existing on a white street after dark causes Richard to be threatened and searched by police, for he is an obvious and "defenseless target" (17). The white community makes a joke of black lives, manipulating them in order to cover their own crimes:

> One of the bell-boys…was keeping steady company with one of the Negro maids. Out of a clear sky the police descended upon his home and arrested him, accusing him of bastardy. The poor boy swore he had no intimate relations with the girl. Nevertheless, they forced him to marry her. When the child arrived, it was found to be much lighter in complexion than either of the two supposedly legal parents. The white men….spread the rumor that some white cow must have scared the poor girl while she was carrying the baby. If you were in their presence when this explanation was offered, you were supposed to laugh. (19)

The white system uses its own black stereotypes to protect itself. By using the accepted over-sexuality of black men and the powerlessness of black women, the white police are able to deflect blame from a white rapist while simultaneously debasing two young lives. The whites are in control of every power source, creating a systematic means to demoralize the innocent and victimize the powerless.

Jim Crow enables this vast system that surrounds all southern black Americans

to suppress their potential and their right to personal sovereignty. When Richard is invited "to try to learn something" by his boss at a factory, he is accused of trying to "git smart" (12) by his coworkers. They use the classic excuse of disrespect by not saying 'sir,' "the worst insult that a Negro can utter to a southern white man" (14), and make him flee the job with the threat of beating with a steel bar. Blacks are not to be educated in any way, for that would threaten the superiority of whites and allow black Americans to become upwardly mobile, defying the color hierarchy. They are not allowed to even read library books, and so Richard must pretend to be a servant in order to access them (21). Under Jim Crow law, no person of color may better themselves. They are excluded from the American Dream of individual work ethic and advancement, so any ambition is a threat to the status quo. The thirst for knowledge is the thirst for power—information must be hoarded and guarded against the threat of black equality. By depriving blacks of a thorough education, of job opportunities, and of due process, they are continuing to deny the humanity of black people. The whites of the Jim Crow South are still slavemasters: they rape, lynch, and murder with the same authority. Although the black southerners are not slaves in name, they are ideological slaves, kept deaf and dumb through suppression of knowledge and opportunity. They are even so oppressed, so ensnared in this system, that they hold each other back:

> When I told the folks at home what had happened, they called me a fool. They told me that I must never again attempt to exceed my boundaries. When you are working for white folks, they said, you got to "stay in your place" if you want to keep working. (14)

This is the education that Jim Crow offers its black citizens. They must grin and bear it, they must mask their pain and hatred, and they must kill and bury whatever hopes they might have. But as we see, even those who play along with Jim Crow are living a rich

internal life in spite of white suppression. It is from this spiritually resistant perspective that Wright depicts his characters in the following chapters. Although he and every other black southerner lives in this world of racism, they are not of it. Like Wright, his characters struggle against the system; even when they lose, they die with the pride of having stood for something.

The first of the fictional stories is "Big Boy Leaves Home," a tale of the dangers facing innocent black male youths as a result of over-sexualization by whites, and the justification of violence based on the premise of protecting white womanhood. The chapter begins innocently enough, as a group of four friends skip school in order to visit their local swimming hole, despite it being forbidden by the white landowner on pain of death. The owner, Harvey, had "took a shot at Bob for swimming in here" (33) before, but the boys are excited and naive, and so they go anyway. The boys wander to the hole, play-fighting and mimicking the violence that older black men face. Leaving their clothes on the bank, they play naked in the water and talk about their dreams of moving "Noth," where "colored folks…is got ekual rights" (36). Suddenly, a white woman appears near their clothes, and panics at the sight of the four naked black boys. Her army officer husband appears, and he immediately shoots and kills two of the boys. Taking no account of their youth, the husband has the right to shoot the boys because they are a sexual threat, no matter their intentions. Although they merely wanted to leave at the sight of the white woman, her accidental exposure to their nudity is grounds for death. Black boys not given the benefit of the doubt: their childhood does not exist. A black male is a black male, and he is considered a natural aggressor towards white femininity and white purity. Black males will inevitably offend the whites because of

this image as dangerous rapists, and they will inevitably be killed no matter what their crimes.

After his friends are shot, Big Boy and his friend Bobo fight off the husband, and Big Boy grabs his gun and shoots the white man. The two boys flee home, and Big Boy's family is utterly distraught by the news. His mother pleads to God, because "[n]obody but the good Lawd kin help us now" (47). Big Boy has escalated the situation by daring to defend himself against a murderer, but now he is helpless against the destructive aftermath to come. A lynch mob is inevitable, so Big Boy hides out in a kiln to avoid the depravity of the white vigilante justice. Fearing for his friend Bobo, he is haunted by the image of death by dog. The elders of his community "tell tales of blood-hounds….foamin n howlin, [to] tore im t pieces" (52). This, and so many other horrors, are considered justified treatment for the blacks who step out of line, for their lives are disposable. While hiding out, Big Boy learns that Bobo has been captured, and he overhears the sadistic plans of the lynchers. They have a hunger to kill, and bicker over who gets to inflict which torture upon the young boy they have caught. The lynch-mobbers have a cache of warlike tactics to murder in the slowest, most painful, and most denigrating means possible. They have barrels of tar, with which to tar-and-feather; they have gasoline with which to burn; they have ropes to choke and chains to bind; they have knives to cut "sourvineers" (61) from the living body of a tortured young boy. They gather their women to watch, and all of them sing "*We'll hang ever nigger t a sour apple tree*" (59). This is a community moment. Lynching is exciting, and the fervor increases until the rain suppresses the fun, leaving a "charred sapling on the slope" (65) for Big Boy to find when he leaves his hiding place to flee north.

The whites in Big Boy's town use the most cruel means possible to make an example of their victim, who is seen as a potential rapist and a murderer no matter what his actual actions were. By publicly torturing him to death, the lynchers center the community around this violence and condone it as a means to reinforce the power structure. By viciously destroying a young black boy, the whites justify the fear already felt by black people, and encourage it to spread. However, by defending himself and fleeing for his life, Big Boy defies the white power system that wants him to submit and quietly die. He will escape to Chicago and make a new life for himself out from under the oppression of the Jim Crow system. Even while his family's home and possessions have been burned, they have sent one of their own out into the world, where he might have a chance to truly live. They worked together to hide and smuggle him, and this community power is a resistance in its own right. Innocents have died and victims have been abused, but there is still a sense of hope for the future for this young black boy.

The second of Wright's stories, entitled "Down by the Riverside," follows a black man trying to save his family in the midst of a dangerous flood. To save the lives of his mother, son, and laboring pregnant wife, Mann must accept a stolen boat to get them to higher land. He has been struggling under constant hardship for the past few days, for the flood had isolated his family, he had no food, no means of escape, and his wife Lulu was in desperate need of a doctor after four days of labor. The flood has caused panic in the community, and so Mann must also fear for his own life: "in times like these theyll shoota nigger down jus lika dog n think nothin of it" (69). He has no choice but to take to the dangerous waters in a conspicuous white rowboat. As luck would have it, he rows right up to the house of the owner of the boat, Mr. Heartfield,

looking for a phone. There is no mercy for this son, father, and husband, for his guilt as a thief—though he did not actually steal the boat—surpasses his human value. Heartfield shoots several times at the family in the boat, but misses in the darkness. Desperate to save his family, Mann is forced to shoot and kill Heartfield, and he flees to the hospital despite feeling "that getting the boat to the hospital now meant nothing" (84) because he feels sure he will be caught. He knows that his desperate actions of self-defense will be met with a white-righteous fury, "remembering…tales of whole black families being killed because some relative had done something wrong" (85). The fear of death is not enough to keep him from trying to save his family,
and so he continues to row through the flooded maze of his town to the hospital.

Upon his arrival, however, he finds that he is too late. His wife has died in the long and strenuous journey, and he receives no mercy from the white doctors. They have no compassion for the difficulty of having labored to save his family, instead telling him that the loss of the wife and baby is his fault for not being able to "have gotten her here a little sooner" (90). Mann is even mocked by the soldiers helping at the hospital for being "fool enough to row a boat against that current" (87) rather than staying where he was. After having faced death, having killed a man to survive, and rowing for hours while fearing for his life, Mann's loss is brusquely dismissed and he is told to keep moving on to save his mother and son. He is even deprived of the right to grieve for his wife and child, because he is wrangled to work on the levee along with all other black men. Mann is told that he "ought to be glad youre not dead in a flood like this" (96) while choking back tears for Lulu, and given a sandwich to "make [him] feel better" (97). The white men have enacted martial law to fight the natural disaster, and

have reverted to old slavery tactics in order to allow white people to flee before the flood:

> They done put ever nigger they could fin on the levee by the railroad, pilin san n cement bags. They drivin em like slaves. Ah heard they done killed two-three awready whut tried t run erway. (73)

In a crisis such as this, the devaluation of black lives becomes more apparent than ever. Black men are not seen as people trying to escape, but as indentured laborers who must be sacrificed in order to protect white property and white lives. They are unable to resist or to help their own families, and even when they have saved white lives, there is no real gratitude.

When the levee breaks, Mann is sent on a team to save a white family from the flood, but to his horror, he finds it is the Heartfields. He considers telling the black boatsman, Brinkley, that "[i]ts mah life ergin theirs" (107), but it is too late to stop the mission. Mann is in a desperate panic, and when he arrives at the Heartfield house, he is stuck in a life or death dilemma. He is recognized as the shooter by Heartfield's young son, and Mann knows what will happen to him if he has "to answer for killing a white man" (105), and so he must make a fatal choice.

> Yes, now, if he could swing that axe they would never tell on him and the black waters of the flood would cover them forever and he could tell Brinkley he had not been able to find them and the whites would never know he had killed a white man…His body grew taut with indecision. (110)

Mann is prevented from killing the wife and two children by a shifting of the house due to the flood, and by Brinkley's ability to see into the house afterwards. He accepts that he must help save the family that will kill him, but there is no hope for any leniency from them. He is identified by the young son, and given no way to defend or explain

himself. This is martial law—he is to be executed immediately. The other black people stand idly by as he is marched off to his death, and Mann knows that "they would not and could no help him, even as he in times past had not helped other black men being taken by white folks" (117). There is no point in trying to save him, for the whites are in control.

However, Mann cannot suppress his urge to resist the passive death allotted him. He would rather "be killed while shooting" back at the whites than to die silently (120). He escapes his guards and runs off into the woods to "die before he would let them kill him" (122). He wants dignity in death, to be allowed to fight for himself until his last breath. Mann is shot in the back at least five times, and his body is pushed into the river to float away with the rest of the debris.

This story of sacrifice and loss depicts the apathy a black man must face in the Jim Crow system, and the inhuman treatment he receives even during a natural disaster. Black lives are worth nothing except for their ability to lift sand bags—there is no empathy for their desperate struggle to survive in a shared catastrophe. They live in a system which offers them no recourse but crime, a system that creates cycles of need and fear, which becomes panicked crime, which becomes execution, which reinforces white feelings of superiority and white fear mongering. This cycle gives Mann a sense of impotence, because he has no way to resist this treatment, nor any alternative actions that could save his family. He does not, however, sacrifice his sense of self amid the horrors of loss, killing in self-defense, and enforced labor. Mann demands to die by his own means; by running away from his captors he reveals them to be cowards who would shoot a defenseless man in the back. He may have lost his love, his child, and his

life, but Mann has saved his mother and son, and he goes down fighting.

The third of Wright's stories is a vignette entitled "Long Black Song," focused on the helplessness of black people, particularly the vulnerability of black women. Sarah is a black farmwife, married to Silas, a black farmer who has managed to buy his own land and build his own house. She has been left alone in their farmhouse with their infant while Silas went to town to sell their cotton, so she spends time distracting the child and reminiscing about her sensual past. Her old boyfriend, Tom, had been shipped off to war like so many other men, and she worries that he has died. She feels that he must be dead, since "to go so far away from home was a kind of death in itself[…] [j]ust to go that far away was to be killed" (126). Sarah is extremely lonely, craving the passion of Tom and missing the lesser romantic attentions of her husband.

A car arrives at her isolated house, driven by a clock salesman hoping to sell them an expensive graphophone. The young man plays Sarah a song to entice her purchase, and they chat about his life. He is a student of science, but Sarah has never heard of the concept—it seems that she has had no formal education. The man requests some water, and so Sarah leads him to their well in the dark, where he takes advantage of the excuse that he can't see in order to touch her breasts. He assaults her in the dark, claiming that "Im not going to hurt you!" as she struggles to escape him (134). She fights against his control, trying to preserve some control over her own body:

> But hes a *white* man! A *white* man! Naw! Naw! And still she would not let him have her lips; she kept her face away….she straightened, rigidly, feeling that she had to straighten or die. (134-5)

She flees into the house, but the man follows her. He rapes her in her own bed, and she cannot resist his physical control.

After he is done, the salesman says that he will discount the graphophone for her, and leaves it—he will return for payment from Silas. Shortly after, Silas returns with happy news of having received a good price for his cotton, and that he has bought more land and new cloth for Sarah. He realizes something is wrong when Sarah mentions the lowered price for graphophone, and then he discovers the salesman's hat in their room and a handkerchief in their bed. Silas believes that Sarah has willingly had sex with the white man, and gives her no time to explain before he begins to rant and threaten her with a whipping.

Silas is beyond indignant at the extent to which he has been denigrated by white people. He is jealous of his wife's ex-boyfriend, jealous of her rapist, and infuriated by the uphill battle to succeed as an honest black man.

> [“]From sunup t sundown Ah works mah guts out t pay them white bastards whut Ah owe em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house! Ah cant go into their houses, n yuh know Gawddam well Ah cant! They don have no mercy on no black folks; we just like dirt under their feet! Fer ten years Ah slaves lika dog t git mah farm free, given ever penny Ah kin t em, n then Ah comes n fins they ben in man house…” He was speechless with outrage. (140)

Silas is “mad ernuff t kill” (143), to commit a crime of passion as retribution for all of his lost time, lost money, and lost pride taken by the white power system. He has built himself up to equal status with white men as a landowner out of a sense of pride and independence, and he is ready to die to avenge his loss.

Even in the face of Silas' threats to beat her, Sarah still feels responsible for the rape. She knows that he is preparing to face off with the white man, but she cannot go and plead with Silas because of “that whip in his hand” (145). She feels that Silas' suicide mission is “all her fault” (145), but she is helpless to prevent the violence. Sarah

knows that the cycle of violence cannot be stopped: “White men killed the black men because they could, and the black men killed the white men to keep from being killed.” (144). This power struggle is beyond her control, so she is forced watch as Silas faces his sworn enemy. When the car arrives, there are two white men who come out to face Silas, who is prepared to beat them down with his whip. This is not enough for him, however, and Silas runs to get his gun during the struggle and kills one of the white men. The other escapes in the car, likely to bring back a lynch mob to kill Silas.

Sarah runs back to the house from her hiding spot to find Silas a broken man. He is throwing everything out of their house in order to blockade himself and wait to fight against the impending white executioners. He is without purpose to live—having built up a worthwhile life out of hard work and pride, he cannot flee and face an empty life again. He has no purpose in life but a final resistance against the white man, to whom he will make his rage known:

> Ahm gonna be hard like they is! So hep me Gawd, Ah’m gonna be *hard*! When they come fer me Ah’m gonna *be here*! N when they git me outta here theys gonna *know* Ahm gone! Ef Gawd lets me live Ahm gonna make em *feel* it! (149)

Silas barricades himself in the house to launch an attack upon the whites, while Sarah flees to the hills to watch his final glory. He shoots several white men, but they light the house on fire. Silas dies silently within the flames, never even crying out in pain so that he gives no sign of weakness. Sarah flees to a friends’ house after watching the destruction of her life and her home, all due to one white man.

“Long Black Song” depicts the fragility of life for a successful and independent black family in the hands of an entitled white man. Even a self-made man such as Silas still lives under the total ownership and control of the white men around him. Sarah is

victimized by the white man, but it is not she that the salesman has destroyed. This white man has utterly demoralized and disheartened a black husband and father, dooming him for enacting a righteous vengeance. Silas' sense of pride could not accept this affront lying down, and so he accepted death in the name of a long-awaited retribution. He may have been killed by the white men, but Silas took some of them with him. Sarah and her child are able to escape with their lives, and while their future is not bright, they live with the image of a dignified death, a sacrifice in order to claim the debt of a life of oppression.

The fourth story is entitled "Fire and Cloud," following the experiences of Reverend Dan Taylor, who is trying to provide for the black community during a time of famine. He is considered to be a 'good nigger,' well-known and cooperative with the town's white government. The story opens as he is returning from the mayor's office after requesting aide for his people and being turned down. He is told that "[e]verybodys hongry, and after all, it's no harder on your people than it is on ours" (154) by the white receptionist, despite the increasing desperation in the black community as food scarcity worsens. The black community mainly works the land, but the white landowners have forbidden them to grow, and so they have no access to food (163). Dan is ashamed of himself for not being able to use his connections to provide for the black community, and he returns to the black side of town to admit his helplessness. He feels that some action must be taken, but fears the repercussions of the activism encouraged by Communist Party members. There is an ongoing struggle for power among the reverends at his church, and so Dan must battle an insider in order to affect some kind of change.

When Dan arrives back at his church, he finds the secret Communist organization in one room and the mayor and his police cronies in another. He must deftly hide the Communist committee, and tell them of the discouraging news on the food shortages. They encourage him to continue trying, and the communist leaders, Green and Hadley, request that Dan allow them to put his endorsement on handbills to advertise their impending demonstration. They plan to march on city hall, but its success depends on the full support of community leaders such as Dan, who is reluctant to risk having his name invoked in a political move. He fears the possible outcome of going against the white system, but feels trapped by the obligation to take action. Rather than promise his endorsement, he goes to meet with the Mayor to plead his case so that the demonstration might not be necessary.

The mayor plays off of his friendly history with Dan in order to try and subdue him. By trying to cultivate gratitude in Dan, the mayor aims to make him suppress the impending demonstration.

> "Dan," began the mayor, "its not every nigger Id come to and talk this way. Its not every nigger Id trust as Im about to trust you." The mayor looked straight at Taylor. "Im doing this because Ive faith in you. Ive known you for twenty-five years, Dan. During that time I think Ive played pretty fair with you, havent I?" (174).

Dan seems to have some amount of trust for the mayor, and the mayor's attitude leads him to believe that he can speak honestly of his people's problems and receive a reasonable response in return. However, the mayor and the police chief are apathetic to the actual struggles of the black community in their town, even if men are dying from starvation. Their only end goal is to have total obedience from the blacks, and to poison the black community against the white Communist activists. The white leaders continue

to insist that the black situation is no worse than the white one, and the police chief is quick to intimidate Dan with threats of police violence towards the demonstrators. He blames Dan for plotting a riot, but says that he will "not be responsible for whatll happen" to those who protest (179). The chief condone vicious violence against any peaceful protestors, because "a nigger…needs his teeth kicked down his throat" (179) in order to be obedient, not reasoned with. The mayor and the police chief fear power within the black community, and they will punish those who resist them.

After his meeting with the white leaders, Dan must face his fellow reverends and tell them of this intimidation. Some of the others would like to act, but Deacon Smith poisons them against any possible action. The Deacon is a fear-mongerer, irrationally afraid of any Communist affiliation and demanding that the black community simply "[w]ait n see how things come out" rather than protest (184). The churchmen are unable to come to a consensus before Dan is called outside to greet a car of white men who have come for him. They beat him and throw him in the car, and beat him for protesting that "yuh cant do this" (187). They are condoned by the local government, so the law does not apply to these kidnappers. The six white men take him to the outskirts of town, tie him to a tree, and whip him for his crimes of "play[ing] round with Reds…[and] get[ting] crowds of niggers together to threaten white folks" (190). By daring to disagree with the town leadership, Dan has subverted the white power structure and struck fear into the leaders of that structure.

When he regains consciousness, Dan faces another trial to survive—he must walk through the white side of town at night and avoid certain death if he looks suspicious, since "[t]o run would mean to be shot, for a burglar, for anything" (195).

During his walk home, Dan awakens to the fury which has been building up in him during his life of frustration and oppression. He swears to himself and to God that he will take action against this constant deprival:

> Some day theys gonna burn! some days theys gonna burn in Gawd Awmightys fire! How come they make us suffer so? The worls got too much everthing! Yit they bleed us! They fatten on us like leeches! There ain no groun yuh kin walk on the they don own! N Gawd knows tha ain right! He made the earth fer us all!…. Fire fanned his hate; he stopped and looked at the burning stars. "Gawd, ef yuh gimme the strength Ahll tear this ol buildin down! Tear it down, Lawd!" (196)

Dan is determined to make the whites pay for their monopoly on life, but when he returns home, he finds few options for action. He has been voted out of the church under the influence of the Deacon, and feels powerless to organize a protest. Whenever he "talk lika man they try t kill" him (200), and so he feels that he can do nothing without community support, which the Deacons have denied him. "Gawds done lef" him without a plan (200), but when he hears that others have been beaten and killed for the protest, Dan takes action.

Although he was kicked out of the church, the members are still awaiting Dan's leadership in spite of their beatings. The community will not submit to white intimidation, because "[t]hey cant kill us but once" and so they "jus as wall die now" for their cause (206). This is the revelatory moment for Dan—he realizes that those who have shared his pain must get together to successfully fight against the white power system. Although they may be beaten and killed, they will have dignity together.

The protest is successful, for it not only scares the mayor into promising aide to the black community, but it also demonstrates the power of peaceful protest in the face of violence and murder. The white establishment submits under the pressure of the

unified force that faces them—although the black citizens have suffered deeply, they have a common purpose in their sufferance. The community has united, and Dan finds his faith again through the message of the people.

The fifth and last of Wright's stories, "Bright and Morning Star," combines many of the themes of the previous four, including the vulnerability of women, the power of community organization, the benefits of Communist affiliation, and the use of violence to demoralize black leaders. This tale follows a black woman, Sue, who has lived a "life-long ritual of toil" (213) to raise her sons and support them in their Communist endeavors. Her son Sug has already been arrested for Party activity, and so she constantly worries about the well-being of her second son Johnny-Boy, who is an active recruiter. She is very supportive of their political ventures, for "she had grown to love hardship with a bitter pride; she had obeyed the laws of the white folks with a soft side of secret knowing" that her religious faith would carry her through. However, as her sons became more active in the Party, she became aware of their vision and shared their faith in the Communist ideology. Sug and Johnny-Boy are conscious men who see the "wrongs and sufferings of black men" (216) and have demanded to get more out of life than mere survival. Sue knows that her endurance will carry her through the struggles of supporting the Communist Party and those within it. She considers sacrifice to be natural to those who care for something in their lives: "It was just as natural for Reva to go back through the cold rain as it was for her to iron night and day, or for Sug to be in jail" (219). Her human connection to those in the Communist Party, such as Reva, a young white woman, is Sue's "refuge from shame and degradation" (219) that makes her sacrifices palatable.

Sue welcomes Johnny-Boy home after he has been canvassing, but knows that he must leave again to continue his work, made all the more dangerous by the news of a spy within the Party. She feels that "his coming was like a leaving.…to see him now was to say good-bye" (220) because of a sense that he is to be lost for the sake of the Party. She fears the new white members of the Party, warning that they are more likely to rat out. Johnny-Boy dismisses her fear as unsubstantiated, then leaves to fight for the Party. Shortly after, Sue's home is invaded by the sheriff and his cronies, who begin to eat her food and search her house for Johnny-Boy. Sue shows no submission, and tells them "Yuh white folks git outta mah house!" (227). She will not bow down to intimidation in her own home, for there is "nothing on this earth…that they could not do to her but that she could take" (229). She gets them nearly out of the house, but the sheriff wants the last word because he has been disrespected by an old black woman. He beats her unconscious to silence her. As she regains consciousness, she is greeted by Booker, a recent white recruit to the Party whom she senses is the spy. In her weakened state, he presses her for the names of all important Party members, and she gives him the entire list out of fear that they will not be warned of the sheriff's impending attack.

Once she had recovered some, Sue is burdened by the guilt of having given information to a traitor. She has sacrificed so much for the Party, but she feels that she had allowed her old religious hopelessness to make her forget her new "hope [for] the fight of black men for freedom " (240). She decides that she must act to protect the Party members whose names she had given. Sue becomes an assassin—she takes her gun, hides it in a sheet, and walked through the muddy fields and forest, to shoot Booker before he can betray everyone. She is seen and taken to see her son, who is

tortured in front of her for not confessing names. The sheriff tries to coerce her to convince Johnny-Boy to confess in order to survive, but she shares his willingness to die in order to protect others. She watches as her son's legs are broken and he is made deaf by the sheer force of abuse. She wishes to put him out of his misery, but she must endure until she can shoot Booker. He arrives to the scene, and she immediately shoots him through the head. Sue is then taken down by the other men, and shot through the chest. She dies taunting the white men: "Yuh didnt git whut yuh wanted! N yuh ain gonna nevah get it!" (250).

Sue stands as an amazingly determined and powerful woman. Her lifetime of struggling to survive and constantly working to support her beloved sons has made her a creature of endurance. She has not lost her hope in the consoling realm of the afterlife, but is an active proponent for a better life for her sons. Her sense of self gives her power against the white system which seeks to oppress her and hers. Even when she loses something to that system, she takes it in stride and continues to fight for a new way of life. The Communist ideology shared by Sue and her sons promotes sacrifice for the greater good, and they are ready and willing to protect their comrades for the sake of social progress. The inherent power of community organization through the Party is resistant to the intimidations of the white power structure—the violence against their leaders only invokes martyrdom and respect. It is not only pride which enables Sue to stand up to her oppressors—it is the knowledge that she is protecting those who are working to improve the world for her people.

The horrors within these five stories serve to highlight the resiliency and ideological superiority of the oppressed black characters in comparison to the whites

who support and uphold the Jim Crow system. The white oppressors are enabled by this system to become depraved sadists who seem to be fulfilled only by the vicious destruction and denigration of black bodies. By exerting their physical, psychological, and emotional control over blacks, the whites work to preserve their own power hierarchy and sense of superiority. The ability of the black characters to endure this torture and resist oppression is a statement of the human power of will. Wright depicts a social setting that is nauseating in its abuse of black people, and the resulting revulsion and horror is necessary to communicate the reality of such an inhuman system of life. However, his characters are able to survive and fight in such a system because they will not give up hope, and they will not sacrifice their human dignity. Even in the abhorrent setting of Jim Crow, they are rebels, organizers, and leaders working to improve their world—and they are ready to die trying.

Section 2: *Native Son*

The most well-known of Richard Wright's works, *Native Son* follows the crimes of a young black man, Bigger Thomas, who is completely socially isolated and who becomes nearly barbaric in his actions as a result. The narrative explores the psyche of this man stuck within the cycle of racism which prevents his advancement, and which pushes him to commit murder as a means of protecting himself within a broken system. Bigger Thomas stands as a representative of many such lives which have been lost to the ravages of systematic racism. As Wright explores in his introduction, these men have faced a lifetime of bigotry and white control, and they have found that the only effective means of self-assertion and self-expression is through violence. These men live in a country that despises them, whose justice system has no recourse of self-defense, and whose liberal whites do not understand the depth of hatred faced by black Americans. The Bigger Thomases of the world see the system which aims to destroy their sense of self and will to live, and so they fight back against that system through the only means they have. Wright's narrative explores not only the psychological process behind Bigger's actions, but also reveals the repercussions of othering black Americans to the point that they are utterly estranged from their countrymen. By examining this particular figure of a black American, Wright is able to depict the fatal disadvantages that black people face as a whole, and investigate the social undercurrents that lead to such violent rebellion.

Bigger is a young, poor black man living in the 1930's Chicago South Side with his mother and two siblings. His father is dead, and Bigger must provide for the family alongside his mother. He is part of a gang that frequently robs black businesses in order

to get money. Bigger has been registered with the local social aide office, and has received a job assignment that he is reluctant to accept, for his mother is constantly guilting him to accept it and to work like a man. He focuses on the gang's next hit instead, their first attack planned against a white business. He and his friends are nervous to target a white man, so Bigger starts a fight that prevents them from enacting the robbery and which splits him from the gang. He accepts the job position, and when he arrives at the home of his new employer, Bigger finds himself utterly lost and isolated within the rich white home of Mr. Dalton, a real estate investor who owns Bigger's apartment building and many others. Bigger has never been in a professional or social setting with whites, and finds himself extremely uncomfortable and shy in their presence. Mrs. Dalton, the blind wife of Mr. Dalton, and their daughter Mary Dalton are both welcoming to Bigger, but also excessively overfamiliar. Bigger fears for his job because of Mary's openness, but overall enjoys the new position because he will be newly independent and well-paid. Later that night, he is asked to drive Mary to her class, but finds that she actually wants to pick up her Communist activist boyfriend, Jan. Feeling that he must obey Mary's every command in order to keep his job, Bigger must obey their wish to sit in the front seat of the car with him and to dine at an 'authentic' black restaurant. He is forced to sit and eat with them, and he drinks heavily in order to cope with his discomfort while they attempt to recruit him into the Communist Party. They give him pamphlets, and then ask him to drive around the park while they continue to drink. After dropping Jan off at a party, Bigger brings Mary back to the Dalton home, where he must help her up to bed because she is too drunk to walk. Mrs. Dalton comes in to check on Mary, but she does no know that Bigger is in the

room. He panics and fears that Mary will give him away, and he accidentally suffocates her with her pillow. After Mrs. Dalton leaves, he realizes he must dispose of the body and come up with an alibi for this death. Bigger sneaks the body to the cellar, cuts off its head, and stuffs it all into the furnace to be incinerated.

The next day, the house is filled with journalist reporting the missing heiress, as well as a private investigator working for Mr. Dalton. They accidentally discover the bones of Mary in the furnace, and Bigger flees the house before they can place blame on him. He reaches out to his girl, Bessie, and confesses his crimes to her, forcing her to go on the run with him. He knows that she is a liability, and is coldly aware that he must get rid of her eventually. The two run around the South Side looking for adequate shelter, and after they bunk down for the night in an abandoned building, Bigger rapes Bessie and smashes her head in with a brick. He dumps her still-living body down an airshaft and continues to flee, carefully tracking and avoiding the police-condoned mob searching for him. The area of freedom becomes more and more restricted, until Bigger is finally stranded on a rooftop, where he resists capture but is eventually frozen out. He is taken to jail, where he must face the Daltons, his family, and his gang. Bigger receives the sympathy of Jan, who realizes his own role as a white man in the oppressive system, and who puts him in touch with a Communist lawyer, Max. This lawyer understands the reality of Bigger's life as a black man, and gets him to open up about the motives for his crimes. Max uses these motives in court to argue against the racist structure that has created Bigger and motivated his actions, but the influence of the prosecution is too strong for them to achieve anything. Bigger is sentenced to death, and in the days before he is executed, he comes to terms with what his life has been. He

finds that his crimes meant something, that they were a means of expressing control in a world that deprives him of his self-sovereignty. Bigger then walks calmly to his death.

The narrative of Bigger Thomas is meant to portray the paradigmatic black American criminal. He is a million black men, struggling without a purpose in life and deeply resentful of the white system which has made him so. They control the jobs, they charge blacks more rent for ghetto-only locations, they raise the prices of food within the black neighborhoods, and the only philanthropy given them is superficial programs aimed at reaping political benefits for powerful white men. Stuck within this horrific cycle of frustration and deprival, men like Bigger Thomas become violently hostile towards their white overlords. This creates a well of aimless hatred within him, for he is not allowed to truly live within his own country, nor does he have any means of escape. Instead, Bigger's fears overwhelm him, and lead to a fatal path of pointless violence that will inevitably end in his demise, and only continue to reinforce white racial fear-mongering. Wright depicts the racial violence within America as an inevitable result of its racist practices, which are pervasive within all aspects of society. Although Bigger's actions are not rational or sympathetic in the least, the depravity of his choices underline the perversion of the system that motivates them. Wright depicts a monstrosity of a man, but Bigger is a monster created by the American way of life.

The Bigger character is a conglomeration of tendencies observed by Richard Wright during his time among the various black communities of America. Wright recognized the urge to express some type of control among many black men, even to the point of sadism. The general Bigger is "never…happier then when he had someone cornered and at his mercy" (*Native* ix), for he is able to invert the power structure that

has dominated his life, and redirect that hatred towards someone else. The white system has treated Bigger sadistically his entire life, indeed all black men during their lives. Innocent men are picked up by the police for unresolved crimes, then “grilled night and day, hanged up by his thumbs, dangled by his feet out of twenty-story windows, and beaten (in places that leave no scars…)” (xxviii). The police system has every opportunity to use and abuse black men, and the justice system manipulates these ‘criminals’ in order to send a message to the black community. The courts use black defendants, innocent or not, as “bloody symbol[s] of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world” (257). Police abuse reiterates and confirms stereotypes of black criminality, which in turn keep black people poor and powerless. The Bigger figure reacts to this suppression by taking what he needs from the system. Although Wright reflects that he personally was “more willing to tighten our belts than risk conflict” (ix), he recognizes the value of Bigger’s attitude in light of a culture that does not allow a black man to make enough money to pay rent, live well, and eat well all at once. Black Americans have been deprived of any power via “disenfranchisement…supplemented by a whole panoply of rules, taboos, and penalties designed to not only insure peace (complete submission), but to guarantee that no real threat would ever arise” (xii). The black community still desires to be an active part of their nation, “to belong, to be identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were” (xiv), and so they come to admire the agency of totalitarian leaders as men of action. The Bigger model of man desires this level of control, to be empowered to decide his own life, to be able to “take his life into his own hands and dispose of it as he pleased” (141). However, this desire for self-control extends beyond himself, and results in cruelty towards those who are

closest to him.

He must live as he likes to be utterly free, and so he must sacrifice family connection in order to be his own first priority. Bigger is extremely critical of his family—his mother, who has worked herself into constant fatigue for her family, is a mere nag to him. His sister is only an object for mockery, and his young brother is unintelligent and annoying to him. Bigger disdains his family, and so he shrinks back from his role as a provider for them, leaving the entire burden on their mother. Even as his mother is begging the Daltons to spare her son's life, Bigger only feels shame: he is so far distant from her emotionally that he cannot understand or bear her open submission to rich white people. Bigger's girlfriend Bessie is merely a means to an end for him—he uses her for sex, and then forces her to help him flee with "fear of capture and death" (142). Bigger only sees value in a life as it benefits himself, and so he coldly decides who around him is worthy of his support, and who may die.

Although Bigger manipulates those around him in an effort to control his surroundings, he is still impotent when faced with the vast white system which overreaches him:

> He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He know the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullest how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair" (13).

Bigger is tormented by the idea that he is helpless to change his life or the lives of his loved ones, and this frustration transforms into more anger towards his world and towards himself. He desires control, so his sense of self is deeply threatened by his impotence. He is a conscious man, aware of all of his disadvantages, but this knowledge is aggravating. He cannot stop thinking about the system in which he exists, and he

"can't get used to" the fact that "[t]hey got things and we ain't….[t]hey do things and we can't" (22-23). His friend Gus tells him "[y]ou think too much" (24) for his own good, and Gus is right. The white power system was designed to keep black Americans deaf and dumb, ignorant of the extent of their disadvantages and unwilling to fight for themselves. By being actively conscious of the racism surrounding him, Bigger feels the effects all the more painfully. This frustration only feeds his need to act, because he believes that "his folks…had to live this way precisely because none of them in all their lives had ever done anything, right or wrong, that mattered much" (100). Restricted by a system that devalues their lives, they do not have any options through which they can make their lives matter. Even the family aide programs that are offered by white liberals are pointless, because they only exist to reduce white guilt and cannot truly affect a people whose lives they cannot understand. Bigger's "feeling of being forever commanded by others so much that thinking and feeling for [him]self was impossible" (307) renders him incapacitated against the snare of the white power system. He cannot escape it, and so he can only violently resist it in order to feel some
sort of control over himself and the path of his life.

The system that surrounds Bigger relies upon cycles which work to subdue the black community and promote their self-destruction. One of these is the cycle of material and economic deprival which suppresses the upward mobility of Black Americans, as well as their participation in and development of the broader cultural zeitgeist. One of Wright's models for Bigger "had no job, for he regarded digging ditches for fifty cent a day as slavery" (x). Pride in one's potential colludes with enforced poverty, and the man's sense of self will not allow him to become an

indentured servant. The cities that are host to the Bigger character taunt the black community with extremities of “gaudy luxury” alongside “scabby poverty” (xxvi), sharpening the distinction between black and white lives. Even the black middle class provides this distinction, for they wish to be distant from the rage that sources from this economic inequality. They lead “bourgeois lives,” desiring to forget that “their lives were so much touched by anything so dark and brutal as Bigger” and his way of life (xxiii). The desire of the black bourgeoisie to distance themselves from the desperate poverty of general black life has also distanced them from the issues of the majority of people of color. To be a wage slave is to be “tricked…into a cheap surrender” to the powers that be (15): it means to submit to a system that recycles your poverty, eating up your life in exchange for a meager salary. Bigger finds himself trapped by this system and resents deeply “that he did not have a wider choice of action” than to work at an assigned job or starve (16). He resists the poverty cycle that demands his pride or his life, and would “just as soon go to jail” than accept social relief from white people (32). But, it is not only wage slavery that confines the black community. They are also facing a purposeful housing shortage, manufactured to push them into a black ghetto crowded with uninhabited and unsafe housing.

> The rental agencies had told him that there was not enough houses for Negroes to live in, that the city was condemning houses in which Negroes lived as being too old and too dangerous for habitation….And he had heard it said that black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kind of flats. (233)

De facto housing segregation policies, even in a Northern city such as Chicago, are implemented as a way to continue the cycle of black poverty. Under the guise of safety, the city government pushes black families out of their own houses, forcing them to rent

the price-inflated apartments while simultaneously lowering the number of black landowners. The city government has colluded with white real estate businesses to create a false housing bubble, to the benefit of the building owners and the rental prices in white neighborhoods. It is a struggle to even exist within the black community, let alone work enough to support that existence. Eventually, the victims of this system "get so [they] can't hope for nothing" anymore (326), losing their sense of self and often their will to live. The entirety of so many black lives is merely a struggle to scrape by, and hope is eaten up by the gradual demoralization of inhuman living conditions and insufficient means.

The cycles of fear and of violence that run throughout the black community in Wright's Chicago are inextricably linked. Blacks exist in the context of white life, and so they must consider the rules of the whites at all times. Men such as Bigger, who are conscious of their disadvantages under white control, feel that the whites are inside his head. He internalizes white restriction and instills fear in himself out of habit. While planning their first robbery of a white business, Bigger feels that the risk is greater than ever despite the store being smaller than others they have robbed.

> Blum's store was small and Blum was alone, but Bigger could not think of robbing him without being flanked by his three pals. But even with his pals he was afraid. He had argued all of his pals but one into consenting to the robbery, and toward the lone man who held out he felt a hot hate and fear; he had transferred his fear of the whites to Gus. He hated Gus because he knew the 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 with the robbery. (28)

Even when success is nearly assured, the taboo of offending a white man is too intimidating for Gus and Bigger. The enforced respect of white men has been internalized in them, conflicting with the economic need that motivates the robbery.

Bigger is ashamed of his fear of a single white man, and so he projects this self-disgust upon his closest friend. He attacks and humiliates Gus, then cancels the robbery. Bigger's attack of his friend is his only way to suppress the self-hatred he feels, and it allows him to express some feeling of power in a weak moment. He allows fear to undermine his friendships and close an opportunity for his gang. Fear of white retaliation is the main motivation for each of Bigger's violent acts, including the murder of Mary Dalton.

White violence against blacks for real or perceived crimes is an inevitable part of black life—even those Bigger model men who defy white law are eventually punished. "They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded" (xi) for their defiance of white behavioral standards. These punishments have become almost mythic in their depravity, and creates a sense of paranoid fear for those who break white laws. After Bigger has accidentally suffocated Mary, his revelation of the ramifications makes clear the inevitability of this type of crime. As a poor black man, he has been established as a potential (if not actual) rapist, murderer, and general abuser of white women. When he fulfills this role as the monster of white nightmares, he realizes the white perspective: "she was dead; she was white; she was a woman; he had killed her; he was black" (88). No one will care that it was an accident, no one will believe that he did not rape her. White public opinion will find him guilty of being what they always knew he was, and nothing else will matter. Bigger was put in a fearful situation by Mary's drunkenness, knowing that he would be accused of rape for being in her room, and so he enacts violence in order to avoid persecution. However, his act of manslaughter was more than he expected from himself, and so the cycle of fear and

violence must continue in order to escape capture.

The environment of fear and violence that surrounds Bigger has created an uncontrollable desperation within him, which frequently overpowers his ability to reason. Sparked by fear, he is pressured by the necessity to either hide his wrongdoing or to avoid punishment through whatever means possible. It is through this panic that he is able to make himself behead Mary in order to fit her in the furnace—even when "[h]e wanted to run from the basement and go as far as possible from the sight of this bloody throat….He *had* to burn this girl" (91). This impulsion to act in order to save himself is the motivating power behind his criminality. Even when horror threatens to overwhelm him and to make him face the reality of what he has done, his panicked fear will not allow him to be subdued. It enacts a sort of cognitive dissonance, distancing him from his crime by prioritizing his life above whatever regret or emotion he feels, even a paralyzing sense of reality:

> A strange sensation enveloped him. Something tingled in his stomach and on his scalp. His knees wobbled, giving way. He stumbled to the wall and leaned against it weakly. A wave of numbness spread fanwise from his stomach over his entire body, including his head and eyes, making his mouth gap. Strength ebbed from him. He sank to his knees and pressed his fingers to the floor to keep from tumbling over. An organic sense dread seized him. His teeth chattered and he felt sweat sliding down his armpits and back. (174)

The bodily shock he undergoes after beheading Mary is an immensely important signal—he is not a psychopath, he feels a powerful sense of disgust and hatred towards the situation he has put himself in. He cannot overcome his compulsions, however, because he must sacrifice his self-control to his self-preservation. But, this need does not insulate him from fear of judgement. Even as he murders Bessie, he fears that she is actually awake and denouncing him, "her bloody mouth open in awe and wonder and

pain and accusation" (223). He regrets these violent compulsions because he knows that they are sourced in the racial shame he feels. Bigger is "a dispossessed and disinherited man…looking and feeling for a way out" of his way of life (xx). He is utterly isolated, and the presence of others only makes him more aware of his empty existence within the white system. He wishes to escape this shame, to smash that which engenders this mortifying feeling within him. The impulse to destroy the source of shame conjoined with his need to protect himself creates a desperate rashness of action, fueled by the fear that he is, once again, "black and had done wrong" (206). His "hysteria" (194) of self-conscious fear will push him to sacrifice anything in order to escape from his crimes, to withdraw from those who reiterate the disgrace that he has felt during his entire life. He would even kill himself in order to avoid that shame, for it is unbearable to him. Bigger's only outlet to fight this feeling is violence, for he is physically, psychologically, and ideologically isolated from all others. The fear and violence of his environment had become internalized within him, and he is unable to defy the compulsions in which they manifest—he can only regret them.

The ideological isolation in which Bigger has achieved his manhood makes him unable to truly connect with anyone. He looks down upon those who he perceives to live 'lesser' lives, most directly in his relationships with women. Although Bigger has been raised by his hardworking mother, he has come to resent her as a symbol of their family's poverty and of the futility of working to improve one's life. Bigger feels a similar disdain for his girlfriend Bessie, whom he views as powerless and deprived of true feeling or purpose. He resents both women because they do not live as he does, constantly rebelling against the system of control surrounding them.

> He hated his mother for that way of hers which was like Bessie's. What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion. He did not want to sit on a bench and sing, or lie in a corner and sleep….he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black. (226)

These two women in his life both rely on something to ease the pain of neediness. They are not angry and rebellious like Bigger, because for them, there is no real way out of the painful lives that they lead. They bury the pain and shame with numbness—alcohol and blind faith. In Bigger's eyes they have accepted black life as it is, for they both work within the system as wage slaves, fighting an endless battle against poverty. Bigger resents the women's lack of agency, but he is also excluded from any means of coping. He is distanced from the black religious community: "it was his mother's world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world" (238). His consciousness of the disadvantages of black life will not allow him to bow down to the consolation of religious passivity. Although the church offers him a community and a means to bear his hard life, Bigger holds on to his pride and accepts the full pain of life, without the anesthesia of religion or addiction.

Bigger's disdain for women is also tied to his sexual experiences and his lack of sincere connection to anyone. For Bigger, women are a disposable source of momentary pleasure, easily manipulated to suit his needs. His girlfriend Bessie is only a body to be controlled—her mind is of no use to him. Bigger desires the body, but wishes to dominate and destroy the mind which irks him with its needs.

> He wished he could clench his fist and swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face and leave the other helpless and

> yielding before him. He would then gather her up and put her in his chest, his stomach, some place deep inside him, always keeping her there even when he slept, ate, talked; keeping her there just to feel and know that she was his to have and hold whenever he wanted to. (133)

He wishes to consume her body, to make her something submissive and easily controlled. Bigger cannot appreciate her as a person; his only way to connect to her is through the body. His desire to consume her is significant in that it underlines his urge for companionship—he is so utterly isolated that he dreams of carrying another person with him, to be totally his. Bigger's desires echo an inversion of marriage and consummation. He wants Bessie utterly dedicated to his needs, a part of himself at all times. He wishes for the only connection he can comprehend, demanding her sacrifice in order to suit his way of life. He tells Bessie that he has murdered Mary in order to "bind her to him" so that he will not be utterly alone (211), forcing her to go on the run with him. He has no real use for her while they flee the police except as an object to use. She is aware of how little he values her, and regrets ever having gotten involved with him. Bessie has lost herself in Bigger, and so she resigns herself to the inevitable by fleeing with him.

The world looks upon Bessie just as Bigger does: a thing to be abused. No one protects black womanhood; in fact, it is considered an appropriate sacrifice to protect whites. White men "wonder what on a earth a nigger wants to kill a white woman for when he has such good-looking women in his own race" (244). Rape and abuse are considered to be a simple fact of life for black women, for they are under the control of both black and white men. The rape of white women, however, is considered the ultimate crime possible for a black man to commit, and consequently the one they are most often accused of. Although Bigger did not rape Mary, Bessie knows that it will be

the first thing they accuse him of, even above her murder. The accusation of rape is equal to a death sentence, because black men are natural rapists in white public opinion, and that opinion is law. When the newspapers report that he is suspected of rape, Bigger knows that "it meant death before death came, for the white men who read those words would at once kill him in their hearts" (228). As the reporting continue, Bigger is labeled as a "RAPIST" (239) above all, even without mention of the murder in some cases. There is no means to deny or defend an accusation of rape, and so when Bigger is in court, the Dalton prosecution pushes that "the central crime here is *rape*" (377). It is the surest way to guarantee a guilty sentence, while simultaneously minimizing white female lives by prioritizing purity above loss of life. Knowing that he will receive this fatal accusation, Bigger realizes that the real issue is one of power and violation.

> Had he raped her? Yes, he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had felt that night, he raped. But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against the wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. He was a long, taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape. (213-4)

Bigger sees rape in the wider context, separate from its sexual implications. It is violation, an expression of total control aimed at abusing and demoralizing its victim. Bigger knows that he is guilty of violence, but he is motivated by the desperation created by the white power system. He does not accept responsibility for these actions—he places blame solely upon those who have established the corrupt system. By Bigger's definition, black men and women are constantly raped, constantly violated by a country that forces them to fight to defend themselves and to fight for some means

of control. By depriving them of self-sovereignty, the white system makes black lives an endless cycle of rape and raping. Those who are not actually raped are deprived of everything resembling dignity or independence; those who are not rapists are forced to violently pursue control over something.

Wright's America is the manufacturer of this environment of physical and mental control, and there are many ideologies within it that allow for the continued disenfranchisement of black Americans. One of the most powerful of these principles is the illusory American Dream, the idea that anything is available to those who work hard to advance themselves. The Dream lures devotees with the "glitter…[of] newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life" (xiii). The glamour of rich whites is advertised to poor whites and blacks alike, but its it the poor black who are truly estranged from the wealth of America. The knowledge of how to succeed within the American system is carefully guarded within the white world: "it was all a game and white people knew how to play it" (36). Bigger idolizes the icons of rich whitedom, as keepers "of white secrets" (45) that lead to wealth and glamour. Because he is excluded from the possibility of achieving his dreams of influence, the rich white world stands as a forbidden temptation, a mocking phantasm of unattainable well-being. Bigger stands both within and without this national dream, in a dual state of identity. He has been brought up in the context of American idealism and optimism, but "not allowed to live as an American" (xxiv). He cannot participate in the dream—he can only surpass the low expectations that have been set for him. American segregation is not only physical, but a mentality meant to suppress the humanity of black people in order for white people to assert their

dominion, which is supported by the panoply of stereotypes created to further this dehumanization:

> …when folks say things like that about you, you whipped before you born. What's the use?…They say we do things like that and they say it to kill us. They draw a line and say for you to stay on your side of the line. They don't care if there's no bread over on your side. They don't care if you die. And then they say things like that about you and when you try to come from behind your line they kill you. They feel they ought to kill you then. (325)

Black Americans are stranded within their own home country, used as economic fodder to support the wealth of the white population. They are born into a system which denigrates them, which gives them no opportunities to grow, and which provides no means for them to succeed independently. Even those who recognize the disadvantaged position of black Americans are restricted by social cowardice and "[t]he fear of hate" from other whites (332). It is preferable to remain blind to the institutional inequalities of America and preserve "sacred customs" (373) above the lives and livelihoods of millions of fellow citizens.

The broken police and judicial systems that Wright portrays are equally responsible for the plight of black Americans, because they reinforce oppressive social policies while also depriving blacks of any legitimate method of resistance. The police system selectively enforce the law, particularly black-on-black crime. Bigger's gang "always robbed Negroes….for they knew that white policemen never really searched diligently for Negroes who committed crimes against other Negroes" (17). Selective enforcement enables higher crime levels within the black ghettoes, reinforcing the cycle of poverty for its inhabitants. Black business owners see no response, and cannot easily recover from the lost capital; black thieves continue to rob due to a low conviction rate;

crime is redirected away from white property and black economic power is reduced. Selective police enforcement has made it so that "[c]rime for a Negro was only when he harmed whites, took white lives, or injured white property" (307). Their mission is to protect and serve the American people, and by denying this service to black Americans, they deny their citizenship and their rights. The bias within the Judicial system backs up the racist police enforcement system. Blacks are presumed to be guilty in almost every case unless they can prove their innocence. Bigger must (rather ironically) fight these assumptions before he flees, so that the investigation must prove his guilt rather than merely asserting it. The court hearings that Bigger undergoes after his capture are expositions of this type of racist judicial proceedings, because basic rights such as due process and "question[ing] with latitude" (303) must be fought for by Bigger's defense. These systems are meant to favor the powerful, and so when Mr. Dalton is questioned by Bigger's lawyer Max, Max is accused of "brow-beating" (302) even though his questions were basic and intended to discern Mr. Dalton's race-based rental policies. The coroner, who leads the questioning at the inquest, is determined to make Bigger out to be a vicious beast, manipulating the process in order to produce public outrage. He puts Bessie's body out for display in order to incite "mob violence" (306) by likening her manner of death to that of Mary's. Neither the coroner nor the public care that Bigger killed a black woman—the inquest is not even concerned with proving that Bigger did actually kill Bessie. She is just collateral evidence meant to demonstrate a point; her life and death are irrelevant.

When Bigger progresses to the actual trial for Mary's death, the prosecuting lawyer Buckley continues the dramatic tactics of the inquest in order to vilify the

defense. Buckley shames the defense for daring to pursue Bigger's right to due process, because he is guilty of being a "despoiler of women" (352), therefore his trial is an effort to "pervert this Court and cheat the law" (346). Buckley invokes the white man's right to murder black rapists, claiming that Bigger has received a "high honor of sitting in this court of law" (376) rather than his right as a human being. Buckley represents the classic American judicial institution, which in a trial like this is intended to bend to public opinion and political pressure, rather than prove the guilt of the accused beyond a doubt. He uses public outrage as a means to persuade and blackmail the judge, and to ensure a death sentence for Bigger:

> I demand this so that others may be deterred from similar crimes, so that peaceful and industrious people may be safe. Your Honor, millions are waiting for your word! They are waiting for you to tell them that jungle law does not prevail in this city! They want you to tell them that they need not sharpen their knives and load their guns to protect themselves. They are waiting, Your Honor, beyond that window! Give them your word so that they can, with calm hearts, plan for the future! Slay the dragon of doubt that causes a million hearts to pause tonight, a million hands to tremble as they lock their doors! (378)

Buckley uses these dramatic tactics not only to coerce the judge into the desired conviction, but to also reinforce the power of the white population to instill vigilante justice when the courts 'fail' the public. He uses a number of racial slurs throughout the trial, such as "maddened ape," "black cur," "treacherous beast" (376), "bestial monstrosity," and "half-human black ape" (373) in order to distance the crowd from Max's defense and to dehumanize Bigger. Buckley is a fear-mongerer, warping Bigger's crimes into the psychopathic spree of a serial killer, and a threat to the white way of life. He is one of a long chain of men in Chicago who will benefit from a mob of public support for a death sentence, including the State Attorney, the Governor, and the

Mayor (356-7). The judicial process as Wright presents it is merely a tool in the hands of already powerful men. It is not a means to find and bring criminals to justice, but a means to manipulate public fear in order to maintain the status quo. It is supported by the media, who are fed interpretations of events long before any evidence is given, and who set the climate for public trials. Such is the case with Bigger's crimes—journalists carefully craft the expected storyline of black moral and mental deficiency, such as that he is a "primitive Negro who doesn't want to be disturbed by white civilization" (201). Bigger—and members of other minorities—are merely pawns within the cycle of journalism, public opinion, and personal interest. This cycle enables the biased judicial system to continue by supporting stereotypical outcomes, keeping public influence in the hands of the already-powerful.

Bigger's lawyer Max is very much aware of the systematic abuses within the police, justice, and media organizations surrounding the trial, and he attempts to defy this institutional corruption through a thoughtful and humanist defense. Max is a Communist activist as well, and as such has received his share of blind hatred and bigotry from the white power system. Much like black Americans, Communists are used as scapegoats on which to blame social and political problems. Even before Bigger learns anything about Communists, he knows that they are considered villains by the general public. He does not know why people hate them so much, but he associates it with the racial hatred he has experienced because he believes the Party might be "a race of folks who live in Russia" who are always "trying to kill somebody or tear things up" (35). Bigger even attempts to incriminate the Communists in his murder of Mary by signing "Red" to his fake ransom note, knowing that the investigators and journalists

love to blame and vilify the Party. Ironically, Communists are the only people willing to take Bigger's side once he has been captured. Jan and Max are both affected by the system that has abused Bigger and forced him to commit these crimes, since they are segregated and exploited in much the same way (322) and fight for common issues:

> Bigger knew the things that white folks hated to hear Negroes ask for; and the knew that these were the things the reds were always asking for. And he knew that white folks did not like to hear these things asked for even by whites who fought for Negroes. (184)

Max constructs a defense which reflects upon the social issues faced by a poor black man in a country that denies him basic rights and protections. Max battles to demonstrate the implications of "class strife" (xix) and racial conflict upon the psychological well-being of the black population. His political beliefs arise from a more realistic understanding of the interplay of economic and social policy; in defending Bigger, Max denounces the American system as corrupt and abusive. He underlines that the search for Bigger was used "to terrorize the entire Negro population, to arrest hundreds of Communists, [and] to raid labor union headquarters and workers' organizations" (356), thereby enabling hundreds of cases of police abuse, manipulation of the judicial system, as well as raising panic throughout the city. Max's status as a member of a hated minority gives him a unique insight into Bigger's life, allowing him to establish an eloquent defense for Bigger's situation. However, the value of his argument is lost upon the court, for the pressure of enforced public outrage deafens the judge to his humanist approach.

Max's defense of Bigger does not intend to claim that he is innocent or that he is insane—it focuses instead upon portraying the contextual evidence of Bigger's life to demonstrate his "degree of responsibility" (343) as a way to mitigate his punishment

and avoid the death sentence. Max argues that, because the character of Bigger has grown within the context of our nation, "his life and fate are linked to ours" (355), the white population. Max's speech skims over the history of America, illustrating how conquerors have always "*used* others" (359) and that the nation cannot afford to ignore the repercussions of this treatment. He argues that the dominating white culture has engendered a "feeling of of resentment and…balked longing for some kind of fulfillment and exultation" (368) within the black community because they have been excluded from any kind of meaningful existence or purpose in America. All of white America is implicated in this social discord and in the constant denigration of so many of its countrymen. They have all, Max claims, been party to the animalization of black life. By treating blacks as less-than-human, they have forced the black community to live outside of white law and white morality and to act desperately in order to survive. Whites fight to ignore their guilt, to violently suppress it below their sight, but it returns in the hateful reactions of its own victims. The actions of whites have engendered a body of defiance within the black community: having been excluded from the very meaning of civilization, it can only strike against it.

> It has made itself a home in the wild forest of our great cities, amid the rank and choking vegetation of slums! It has forgotten our language! In order to live it has sharpened its claws! It has grown hard and calloused! It has developed a capacity for hate and fury which we cannot understand! Its movements are unpredictable! By night it creeps from its lair and steals towards the settlements of civilization! And at the sight of a kind face it does not lie down upon its back and kick up its heels playfully to be tickled and stroked. No; it leaps to kill! (362)

Max argues that Bigger's violent acts are merely symptomatic of the greater horror of black American life. This state of being has been borne of a constant injustice, a deprivation "of political, social, economic, and property rights" that have effectively

repressed the humanity of what is essentially an entirely "separate nation" (364). Max reasons that by disenfranchising black people from American rights and society, whites have made blacks criminals in their very existence. The state does not want them, and so every action, every assertion of existence, every desire is equal to a "*crime against the state*" (367). The result of this exclusion is mutual self-destruction. Blacks commit crimes against white law because they have no other means to get what they want or need, and whites destroy blacks for acting in a way that they themselves have made necessary to survive. Wright depicts the institutional problems of America through Max, arguing that the black 'monster' that white America battles is a mirror to the wrongs of the powerful. If you are outside of the privileged population (by birth or by politics), they will fight to deny your existence and your rights. A hierarchy can only function if someone is on the bottom, if someone always has less. America achieves this by denying social, political, and economic participation to its native-born black citizens—they are only useful as scapegoats and wage slaves.

The life of an exiled insider which Bigger leads has required him to construct his own personal morality, separate from white law and distanced from the black community, because he has no sincere connection to either. Although many of his decisions are made in moments of intense fear or panic, he must still decide how he will deal with his crimes and what they mean to him. He accepts and rejects traditional laws based on whether he sees real value in them or not: "to go to jail for robbery" is okay with him, because it would mean he has taken action to challenge the white system; "to go to jail for fooling around with reds" is ridiculous, because he would be jailed for mere political discrimination (65). Bigger would rather die than be used and

manipulated by the justice system. His sense of self is gratified only by action, not by righteousness—by taking ownership of his crime, he has "something that was all his own…that others could not take from him" (101). Killing Mary gives him a sense of control over his life and the life of others, making him feel that he has equal power to those who have indirectly dominated his entire life. By taking action, even in fear, he knows that he can create his own control and subject others to it when necessary. Bigger loses some of his fear after killing Mary because he has finally made a significant act, and he will not denounce that act even when it would save his life to claim insanity.

The accidental murder of Mary is the only real act of Bigger's life thus far, and he "did not want to be called crazy" for it (286). Rather, he has an intense compulsion to share the background of his life and to have his crime be understood. This need for compassion binds him to Max, who along with Jan is the only man who pushes Bigger to try to explain what his life has been like and what he felt when he killed Mary. Bigger can only communicate this to Max because of his sympathetic experiences, because to explain his motivations requires "an explanation of his entire life" (286). Bigger's life has been isolated by both the white system and by the racial self-consciousness that has distanced him from other black people: "he had never given himself whole-heartedly to anyone or anything, except murder" (383). He has long wished to share his emotions, but has had no outlet to do so. In talking with Max, he is able to reflect upon his actions and present the feelings of his real self in the safety of a sympathetic counsel. Max understands his need to express the real self, even using it within his argument that black people have been stripped of agency and identity in America:

> “Your Honor, remember that men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from a lack of bread! And they can *murder* for it, too! Did we not build a nation, did we not wage war and conquer in the name of a dream to realize our personalities and to make those realized personalities secure! (366).

Self-expression is the only path to self-control for Bigger, and after discovering this ability it becomes his only comfort. He feels a deep need to be understood before his death, and in the final scene of the novel he is able to discuss his perspective one last time with Max. Through his discussions with Max, Bigger is able to feel “a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person” (333) that he never had been able to before. He accepts this feeling as common to all man, as a sign that he is indeed a person who deserves to have emotions, who deserves to have his story told.

Bigger Thomas is Wright’s image of the American creature—a figure viciously alone and yet deeply craving connection with others. The narrative of Bigger is a tale of manhood and self-determination warped by isolation and fear, the struggle of a black man to be seen and understood by the white world which engulfs him. Although he is born of this country, he is not of it: to assert his personhood within America is to commit a forbidden offense against the power systems that define the country itself. Bigger must work outside of the law in order to find some means of control. He acts to protect himself, he murders to defy the white system and to defeat fear. He has been so thoroughly estranged from his countrymen that he has become a different people. His life is so replete with futility and anger that he must take action, any action, to rebel against this constant oppression. Wright has thoroughly depicted the psychological development of such a man, making clear the fatal repercussions of that total lack of empathy that is racism. Wright’s portrayal of the American system of racism not only destroys a man’s life from birth, it breeds inhumanity in those who benefit from it.

Section 3: *The Outsider*

Wright's *The Outsider* further explores the effects of social isolation and the need for control as experienced by a man who has the opportunity to start his life completely over, leaving behind the burdens of his social obligations. This man, Cross Damon, has lived a typically depressing life in the ghettoes of Chicago—he is stuck in an unhappy marriage, estranged from his children, with a pregnant underage mistress and a job which only pays for his wife's demands. He drinks too much as a means to cope with the futility of his life, and he is mentally distant from friends and the black community because he has no purpose among them. One day, he is in a subway accident and reported dead. Through this morbidly happy accident, he is able to abandon all he knows and begin a new life in New York City. Wright explores the social and ideological estrangement of this educated black man and the pressures which enable him to so easily abandon his former life. Cross must then re-identify himself in the context of his new independence, as well as reorient himself within the power systems surrounding him. After separating himself from his former constraints, Cross finds himself acting on his impulses to control those around him, even to the point of murder in order to get rid of those who offend him. Wright depicts the process of discovering the self completely outside of the social, cultural, and economic constructs which usually shape our beings. Freedom from these things gives the opportunity for a new and self-centered morality which leads Cross to his eventual demise. Wright's narrative explores the deep ethical ramifications of the cycles of isolation and impoverishment experienced by black Americans: they do not fit in within the established power and political system, nor within the body of laws established by the

white system. A black man existing in these systems cannot thrive, and once he has left this mode of life behind, he can only act upon his own needs, which is inherently harmful to the general society.

Cross Damon is totally isolated despite being surrounded by friends and family. He is a college-educated man, so he does not relate well to his uneducated peer group; his estranged wife offers no sympathy for his struggles; his lover is too young to connect with; his mother is strictly religious and offers no comfort. His difficulties have piled up upon him, and the "mere telling [of] his story would have helped" him deal with the constant struggle (14). However, his feelings of pride restrict him from reaching out to anyone, for he feels he "would have murdered his confidant the moment after he had confided to him his shame" (14). Those around him would not understand the particular struggle of identity which he faces. He is outside of society "not because [he] had been born black and poor, but because [he] had thought [his] way through the many veils of illusion" (28). Cross considers the trappings of society to be worthless, normal relationships having the "disorganized character of a nightmare" (25) which defies his desire for order and purpose. Cross is cut off from the world, unable to truly connect to the subjective lives of those around him (330) and often feeling superior for finding society meaningless. His isolation is not only social, but ideological. He wishes to have total control over his relationships to others, yet is indignant at any of their self-serving actions, such as when his pregnant 15-year-old girlfriend dares to call a doctor and risk exposing his statutory rape (37). He is willing to use others to his advantage, even to the point of violently desecrating a (probably) dead body in order to free himself from the subway accident (75). He has no sense of perspective or responsibility

for his choices, such as blaming a prostitute for “making him lose control” and telling her that he is fleeing (105). Cross defies both actual and social laws by asserting that his actions and crimes are in accordance with his own subjective worldview, and so nothing he does is wrong. He is a man “whose consciousness has not been conditioned by [modern] culture” (316)—he has no consideration for the subjective reality of other lives or the objective morality of his national culture. Cross is a man of extreme pride and utterly destructive arrogance. Nothing has value to him besides his own actions, and so he is utterly exiled from the rest of humanity.

It is this distance between Cross and society which enables him to so easily flee from his life and pursue the freedom he feels is his due. Long before the subway accident, Cross devised a sociopathic plan to gain freedom from his marriage to Gladys without the guilt of demanding a divorce. He decides that the only way to be rid of her is to make her throw him out, and so he attempts to manipulate Gladys into thinking that he has somehow lost control of his body and his memory. He randomly attacks her one morning, then continues on with his day. Upon returning home, he tells the shocked Gladys that he has no memory of the assault and that she imagined it. He repeats this attack on Easter, calculating that she will be completely unprepared; “simulating dementia” (63), he attacks her. She believes him to be crazy, and threatens him with his gun to get out of their house. He gets his wish—“[w]alking away, he felt good” (65). This is freedom to Cross: the ability to do anything and avoid any sort of comeuppance. Any ends justify whatever means that allows him to be free of the “vast web of pledges and promises…whose implied obligations had been slowly smothering his spirit (376).

Before the subway accident, Cross’ only sense of power is over his own life: he

would rather kill himself than submit to the demands of his responsibilities. Rather ironically, his freedom comes in the form of his legal death. The type of freedom Cross enjoys is beyond human right:

> Others took their lives for granted; he, he would have to mold his with a conscious aim. Why not? Was he not free to do so? That all men were free was the fondest and deepest conviction of his life. And his acting upon this wild plan would but be an expression of his perfect freedom. He would do with himself what he would, what he liked. (87)

Cross is so deeply self-obsessed that he does not recognize that his "perfect freedom" requires significant loss and sacrifice from those who depended on him. If he were to truly value freedom for man, he would be concerned with a sense of respect for others and their freedoms; instead, he merely wants to pursue his will above others and without discretion. Cross sees no value in other human beings because he believes himself to be above them, and therefore others' "value as human beings" need not be respected if they do not serve his purposes (171). Such is the case when he kills his friend Joe so that he is not revealed to be alive. The value of his friends life is null when it threatens his dream of freedom, and so he must be destroyed. Even when he has been found out, Cross believes that his main crime has been in disregarding the "commitment[s] of civilized men" and that his "brutal and bloody thrashings were mere offshoots" of this ideological crime (374). Because others do not live with complete and selfish abandon like himself, they are empty shells without purpose. Having achieved his conception of freedom, Cross is able to fully express his sociopathic apathy.

Although Cross indulges in a total freedom of action, it is controlled and directed by his many compulsions. They come in the forms of a need to confide, a "desire for desire" (24), and an urge to violently destroy those who threaten or offend

him. Before the accident, Cross craved a confidant to express his sorrows brought on by his lustful actions. Cross is attracted to "woman as body of woman" (24), an image of the female body that is manifest in any given individual. However, even after consummation he finds himself still aching "to encompass something within desire and hold it steady, to possess it, to become one with it" (25). His lust for women is merely another expression of his need to control and own. Despite this urge to master others, Cross cannot fully repress his desire even when it threatens his safety. After fleeing the site of the accident and taking up residence in a random motel, he accepts a prostitute, Jenny, into his room with full awareness that "his situation was too delicate for him to get mixed up with this fetching little tart" (93). His desire for any woman mingles with his need for confidence and connection, and so he ends up telling Jenny that he is a fugitive. Cross is new to the isolation of death, unused to having to live within his own particular reality. Thus he feels he must "tell somebody just to make sure that his situation was not a fantasy of is own mind" (104); doubting his own sanity, he must have reality confirmed by a stranger. However lonely Cross is, his compulsive violence looms as a repercussion for his urge to confide. His friend, Joe, who he accidentally discovers in the same motel, must be killed for what he knows about Cross. Joe threatens to disclose Cross' secrets, and so Cross pushes him out of a window. After this murder, Cross realizes his weakness:

> From now on he had to cope with this impulse of his to confide…. He had thought he was free. But was he? He was free from everything but himself. Loneliness had driven his to confess to Jenny, and fear could have made him kill her as he had killed Joe. (117)

Cross gives up his agency to these compulsions, knowing that he has little control over them and thus little personal responsibility. His violence is self-serving, so Cross takes

little action to suppress this part of his nature regardless of the fear he feels towards his murderous capabilities. The final punishment for his compulsions is the lost of another life, that of Eva, his lover who is involved in the Communist Party. He reaches out to her trusting love and tells her of his four murders, claiming that he will die if he cannot be understood by her (399). Having seen “the black depths of his heart…[and] the horror of his deeds” (404), she chooses suicide rather than face shame and hatred for her love. Cross’ compulsions to lust, to confide, and to destroy distance him from humanity, because he operates within a personal morality which exiles him from any normal relationship. He cannot and does not try to control himself, and so he must sacrifice every human relationship to his egocentric world view.

This distance between Cross and the rest of society was created long before he was in the subway accident. He believes himself to be a total individual because he does not identify strongly with any group—the poor, the black, the Communist, or even the American. Although there are some moments in which he expresses a certain tenderness for black culture, he is not concerned with general racial progress, instead focusing solely on improving his own life. Perhaps this distance sources from a weak family connection. Cross’ father died when he was very young, and although he loves his mother, the only inheritance he received from her is a sense of “dread…[for] [h]e had been born of her not only physically but emotionally too” (17). He resents this emotional likeness to his mother, and so he has separated himself form her love in order to be free of that pressing similarity:

> As her son, he was much too far from her and at the same time much too close, much too warm toward her and much too cold. To keep her life from crushing his own, he had slain the sense of her in his heart and at the same time had clung frantically to his memory of that sense. (17).

Cross feels a confusion of intimacy and resentment towards his mother, but it is not enough to overwhelm his self-interest. He has grown up under her constant religious pressure to be a pious and humble man, but Cross rejects all forms of coercion in order to maintain some form of willpower. In rejecting her religion, he also rejects a traditionally large part of the black community, further distancing him from other people. Although his mother is the only person he seems to regret leaving "to fend for herself" (119), Cross will not allow any ties to oppress his desires. She dies after learning that he is still alive, appalled by the actions of her son.

In addition to Cross' distance from the black community resulting from his feelings towards his mother, he has further exiled himself by prioritizing personal interest. Cross is a conscious man, aware of "how Negroes had been made to live in but not of the land of their birth," and he has found an "emotional home" within the painful story behind the beauty of jazz and blues (140). Despite this connection to the emotional inheritance of his black identity, he does not find an ideological home with them. He sympathizes with the general sufferance of the black American people, but he has not found a purpose in his blackness: "his decisive life struggle was a personal fight for the realization of himself" (142). As an educated man, Cross is further detached from his racial community, because they treat him like he is intellectually impoverished. The black Communists he meets "never expected to see a black intellectual and did not know when they saw one" (172). Cross is unable to connect on a cerebral level with any of his black peers because no one else has a similar educational background, nor a similar ideological perspective. This disconnect enlarges his sense of primacy above the black population, but it also results in his being "pushed completely out of [his

environment]" (204). Cross' racial consciousness and ideological thoughtfulness are a constant burden him, making him constantly aware of that which he does not have. He lives a life haunted by his outsider status within his home country:

> Negroes, as they enter our culture, are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference. They are outsiders and they are going to *know* that they have these problems. They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time….They will not only be Americans or Negroes; they will be centers of *knowing*… (129)

But because Cross has distanced himself from the black community, he inherits only the dual identity with none of the support. He resents this burden of consciousness, wishing instead to be "uncaring and passively brutish" (137), to be able to leave his awareness behind. While the white world pushes him to identify with his race, Cross is repelled by the "terms of existence" (19) for black life, and so he finds himself utterly alone.

Every aspect of Cross' identity is shaped by isolation—he does not connect with his fellow man, regardless of shared history. His behavior towards others is characterized by paranoia, leading him to project threatening intentions onto the behavior of those around him. Even when he meets his match in Ely Houston, a hunchbacked district attorney who has lived a similarly excluded life, he sees only danger in his sympathy rather than relief in finding a compatriot. Although no one could be aware of his crimes, his guilt and isolation create phantasms of pursuit: "he had suspected malevolence in the innocent and had tried to credit the unknowing with motives that they could not possibly have had" (201). Without an identity, Cross is maddened by suspicion. He must recreate himself, give himself a new story and new relationships in order to hide his real self from suspicion:

> He had to break out of this dream, or he would surely go mad. He had to be born again, come anew into the world. To live amidst others without an identity was intolerable. In a strict sense he was not really in the world; he was haunting it, pleading for entrance into life…. (132)

For him, to continue to live without an identity is to live without any real value, and so Cross must create a new self in order to feel that he is a man. Not only must he steal a name and birthday, but he must also shape "a past that would fit in with his present personality" (87). The world is now a blank slate, waiting for Cross to discover what his new manhood will be. His "outlandish position" (147) gives him a particular perspective to evaluate the personalities of others, and to integrate the beneficial into his new self. Repulsed by the emptiness of his previous life, Cross craves "something that would test him and make him feel his worth," some responsibility to reinvigorate his life (143). His "shame at what a paltry man he had made of himself" (142) in his previous life empowers Cross to begin anew, to act upon the desire for power and control which he had always had. Although it isolates him from his fellow man, Cross dedicates himself to his personal perception of the world.

Cross' ideological isolation has given him a particular perspective on the political power systems around him. He sees both fascism and communism as totalitarian regimes, manipulating the needs of the masses in order to direct power to a select few. Through Cross' perceptions during his interactions with the Communist Party, Wright depicts the structural issues at the heart of the Party and presents a critique of those men who pursue control. The Party utilizes the power of community to ensure total submission of its members: "[w]hatever your background is, you can feel at home with us" (173). Although no individualism or "subjectivity" is allowed within the Party on pain of expulsion (174), it lures members with the comfort of passivity.

Because the Party controls its members lives, one need not be held accountable for the path of their life. By offering up their lives to Communism, members accept that they will "be used, ravaged, dominated and filled with a purpose, any purpose as long as the burden of the responsibility for his own life was lifted from his shoulders" (334). The Party totally immerses its members, who Cross sees as living in "a glass jailhouse" (336), for opacity and privacy are not permitted in dedicated members.

Wright's Party is absolutist—you give your life or you get out, possibly with your life intact. It has its members lives at its disposal, to be used or defined strategically to increase Communist power and influence. It will even determine a man's guilt based on a "set of convictions, and given a situation," presuming to know all of human logic and emotion (337). The Communist Party has no reservations in manipulating color and emotion in order to gain allies and dominate lives. Such is the case for Eva, Cross' lover, who was tricked into marrying her husband Gil. Their marriage was arranged by the Party because she was a notable artist and sympathetic to the cause—however, she overhears others discussing this arrangement and is utterly disillusioned with her life and her Party. In the face of this "intimately cynical" betrayal (208), she steeps herself in her work, ensnared by a Party that will not let her go. In a similar vein, Cross' friend Bob, the man who introduced him to the Party after serving him on the train to New York, was also betrayed by the Party for daring to question a decision. He had been assigned to canvass railway workers for a potential union, but is told to cease, regardless of his vulnerable position as a public Communist. Bob claims that he will continue anyways, but is told that "the Party will blacklist you….The Party will kill you. You can't fight the Party" (182). And when Bob decides to continue on,

they do exactly that. With their information on him, the Party has Bob deported back to a Trinidadian jail, where he has no hope to survive (289). The men in control of his life have no sympathy for any so-called traitor of the Party:

> …they had resolved their tangled emotions in the rigid disciplines of Communist politics, thereby rejecting from their hearts the pathos of living, purging their consciousness of that perilous subjective tension that spells the humanity of man. (188)

The powerful Party men have distanced themselves from human nature, instead choosing to enforce the objective truths of Communism. By denying their own human tendencies and needs, they are able to analyze and manipulate those of the lower members.

Because of his experiences examining the motivations of men, Cross sees through the tactics of the Communist power structure: while he admires their effectiveness, he resists their attempted intrusion into his life. During their investigation of him for the murders of two members, Cross delivers a manifesto of his personal belief system. He summarizes history as he understands it, the development towards industrialization and the usage of unindustrialized peoples by the Western powers (353), tracing the development of economic and political power in industrialized countries. Cross believes that in spite of these developments, humans still need consolation, be it in the form of a god, or a ruler, or a political ideology, because these powers make sense of that which man fears (356). Man accepts an unconscious life because it is comfortable: those who are aware of this fact can manipulate the masses and maintain the status quo to personal benefit (363). These are the "little gods" (230), men who crave control, who fight over what little corner of the earth and its people they can dominate. Although Cross hates this figure, he recognizes that he is one of them; he

resists totalitarianism, yet is always working to enact it upon this around him. These men share a common god complex, placing themselves above the general population. Although some join together in their pursuit of power such as in the Communist Party leadership positions, they still pursue primacy above each other;

> *Thou shalt not depend upon others, nor trust them: for this your Party is a jealous Party, visiting the suspicions of the leaders upon the members unto the third and fourth friends of the friends around the Party….*(342)

Although Cross despises these power-hungry men, he sees their hunger within his own actions—in murdering a Fascist and a Communist, "[h]e too had acted like a little god….had been subverted by the contagion of the lawless…which he had sought to destroy" (230). The other "little gods" (230) are inversions of his own power complex, and it is for this that he hates them. Cross feels that he must cleanse the world of these totalitarians, but this compulsion is merely the manifestation of his jealousy. He, like the Party leaders, "feel that they are just as good as the men who rule…they think that they could do a more honest, a much cleaner job, a more efficient job" of commanding the world (363). These men want to shape mankind into their own vision (365), to define the lives of all those who live unconsciously into the desired form. They perceive the world under the influence of a total cynicism: the general population has "no inviolate, private world…which they could not penetrate at will" (408). Life only has meaning when an outside force gives it purpose, and each little god considers himself the man to do the job. Thus does Cross eliminate two of his most aggressive peers, the racist Fascist landlord and the domineering Communist leader, Gil. He gives into this "imperious feeling" (226) and violently murders his competitors. Cross is hypocritical in his pursuit of control, but he considers himself outside of the vast system of power

run by men very much like himself.

After being shot by Party Members and in the very last moments of his life, Cross must try to tell something of his life to Houston, the only person at his deathbed. Cross admits that his life "was…horrible….[b]ecause in my heart…I'm…I felt…I'm *innocent*" (440). He has lived under the rule of others his entire life, for even when he had broken free from his relationships, he still had to act to protect himself within that same system. Cross' isolated and powerless life is the result of the paradox of community: although he has a need for the acceptance, he rebels against forced membership. He does not want to be labeled as black and be made to fight for them; he does not accept Christianity despite its comforts, and he does not want to be coerced into a Christian life; He does not want to be defined by his poverty or his politics, so he resists the propositions of the Communists. Cross desires to be evaluated and treated as an individual, a man, to be recognized for his needs and his ideas. His detachment from the rest of the world has left him with a skewed world view. He sees little value in the lives of those who force him to fight for himself. Cross must constantly assert himself in a world which does not want him: his rebellion is a means to cope with his position within the power systems around him. Through Cross, Wright depicts racial and social consciousness as a sort of curse. Although it frees one from the expectations laid out for him, it also damns him to an isolated life. Unable to connect with any communities and disconnected from the common man, the only path left to him is to compete with other conscious men for a piece of the power structure. Life for the conscious man has been a liminal one, for he is stuck between his assigned identity and his internal self, between the dominating establishments and his desire for self-sovereignty. There is nowhere for

Cross to fit in—he dies alone, friendless, and exiled from society. His search for himself is fruitless, because there is no place for an educated and ambitious black man within his world.

Conclusion

These three texts are ravaged by violence, but it is not without cause—it is the deliberate and systematic violence of a war of races. For Wright, racial conflicts in America are not only part of the struggle for rights; they are vicious battle to the death. He depicts the system that white Americans have created to slowly suffocate their countrymen, resulting in black retaliation which is then used as a justification to further oppress and execute them. It is a self-defeating cycle designed to maintain white power structures, fueled by the fear and blood of millions of black Americans. Wright's image of black America is enslaved within this system, repeating cycles of impoverishment, impotence, and deprival. However, there is a strong vein of resistance within his works. His main characters are agents of the counteroffensive—race-conscious people who are fighting for their independence, committing the criminal act of demanding a dignified life. They do not submit to the bestializing system of white brutality. Instead, these characters seek out power and purpose as a remedy to the spiritual and psychological conquest of white Americans. These resistance fighters are isolated as a result of their break with the accepted systems of their society, often creating a sense of disdain for the lives and experiences of those who have remained in the system. This disdain is a reflection of their frustration with the enforced identity of black people, the policing of ideas and opportunities by that same white system. Wright's America is one in which the races have become so utterly separate from each other that neither recognize the humanity of the other. Whites have destroyed their own sense of empathy for the lives of blacks, and have taught them to feel nothing but fear and bitter hatred towards whites. It is a divided state, torn to pieces by the ravages of racist power structures.

However, it is not without hope, for Wright sees a resilience within the black communities. They will continue to fight, they will continue to push back against white boundaries in order to live and protect themselves. His America is an ugly place, but it is shifting, as its most oppressed peoples rise up to defy and condemn the monstrous system surrounding them.

Chapter 2: James Baldwin

James Baldwin's role in the American expatriate community in France was one of the most celebrated, due to his role as a renowned defender of American civil rights, as an international speaker on the issues of race relations and sexual identity, and of course, his extensive writing career as a playwright, novelist, and essayist. Inspired by the experiences of his "literary mentor" Richard Wright in France (Fabre 195), Baldwin decided to move to Paris in order to escape the stifling racial conditions in America and "to thrive as a writer regardless of color" (196). As much as he perceived Paris to be his "refuge" from America, he was not naive to the reality of French people and their means of life and politics (196). Baldwin's early experiences in Paris were difficult, as he arrived in 1948 to a post-war France that had not yet recovered from the difficulties and deprivation of the Nazi occupation. Devoid of most of the comforts of the contemporary American lifestyle, he lived a poor and mostly isolated life, redeemed mostly by the benefit of being "treated more humanely" (210) than at home. Although spending much of his time alone and dedicated to his writing, he was not blind to the racial climates both in France and the US. Having returned from a trip back to America during the ominous "'national convulsion called McCarthyism'" (203), he found a Paris utterly changed by the progress of the anti-colonial revolts against France. The shifting identities of the colonized peoples of Algeria and Vietnam during this time period amplified his explorations of identity for both black Americans and expatriates in relation to Africa, America, and the Western world. While Baldwin only returned to the States in short professional visits until around 1957—when they became more frequent and longer (208)—his ties to America and the American inheritance were inescapable.

He expressed a moderate view of the Negro problem as being less extreme than the experiences of formally colonized peoples, as being a specifically American problem of "remain[ing] faithful to principles" (202). Baldwin remained invested in the racial issues of America by actively leading demonstrations and speaking for the support of the civil rights movement while in Paris. These actions did not, however, spare him from the particular guilt of a black leader who has left his people to struggle without him:

> I could, simply, no longer sit around in Paris discussing the Algerian and the black American problem. Everybody else was paying their dues and it was time I went home and paid mine. (*No Name* 50)

While he considered himself to be in exile from America, he did not believe himself to be expatriated from it: rather, "[o]ne cannot possibly leave where he came from. You always carry home with you" (Fabre 210). Awarded the Legion d'Honneur in 1985, Baldwin was the iconic American exile, forever hanging between two worlds, and tied inextricably to both.

His experiences as a black American in Paris are reflected deeply in his works, most notably in his portrayal of fellow Americans as liminal characters in the world, the lost children of history. They, too, are in an overwhelming moment of confluence of public history and personal histories. Defined and shaken by the pressure of the unattainable idyll of the American Dream, they are between worlds and between self-conceptions, with no ties anchoring them to a definitive and purposeful existence. Their only driving forces are the desire for success and the fear of failure, but this is not enough to reckon with the isolation and pain of life. Isolated by society or by some internal urgency, they cannot connect with others on any significant level and thus often

project their own fears and insecurities upon those who would love them. Black Americans in Baldwin's writings are paradoxically both connected to their fellow Americans and estranged by the burden of the past. There is a certain universality in the struggle of the black American, who pursues the highest dreams of American society from the lowest stature—climbing the mountain from the valley. But, there are always facets of this struggle which cannot be understood by white Americans or westerners, a pain which cannot be fully appreciated, which prevent the full connection between interracial friends and lovers. Baldwin recreates the racial and psychological space in which he has lived through the lens of the confusions of power and self experienced by white and black Americans alike.

Section 1: *Go Tell It On The Mountain*

Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, published in 1952 after an extensive rewriting process in France, portrays a black family living in 1930's Harlem who, under the pressures of family history and religious expectation, struggle with ideological differences which strain their family bonds. The narrative centers around the 14-year-old eldest son John Grimes, whose religious tyrant step-father Gabriel, an elder in the Pentecostal Church, overshadows his efforts to understand himself and his relationship to the world. The difficulties and confusions of John's transition into manhood are largely autobiographical, reflecting the environment in which James Baldwin and, in a larger sense, many black youths during the 1930's found themselves. Like John, he was pushed to become a Pentecostal minister at the age of fourteen, but chose to leave the position and Christianity behind at the age of seventeen. Through his depiction of this particular moment of his life, we can examine the social environment which shaped Baldwin's youth and which ultimately motivated him to speak out against many aspects of life as a black youth and man in America.

The narrative is set primarily in the ghettoes of Harlem during the 1930's, where John Grimes was born and raised in an environment of crime, racism, and vulgarity. Although trapped in the poverty which surrounds him, John claims his urban surroundings as his home, dreaming of one day controlling them:

> Then he, John, felt like a tyrant who might crumble this city with his anger; he felt like a tyrant who might crush this city beneath his heel; he felt like a long-awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers would be strewn, and before whom multitudes cried, Hosanna! (*Go Tell*, 35)

John's dream of power is reflective of the state of segregation in which he lives, which deprives him of contact with the upper white classes. He admires their riches from afar,

wishing to emulate white influence, “only more powerful, more thorough, and more cruel” (42). John’s outlook is at complete odds with the experiences within his own ghetto and with the experiences of his southern elders. His mother, father, and aunt have all fled their hometown in the South, where destitution was a fact of life. New York was meant to be a promised land, for it “promised more” (186) than the South, but instead it presented the same cycles of racism and denigration in a different form. John’s father Richard, a self-educated man who stood in defiance of those who would look down upon him, faces the horror of the racist justice system and although he is acquitted, his pride and purpose are lost; he commits suicide in despair. Elizabeth, John’s mother, is witness to Richard’s spiritual downfall and victim to sexual intimidation from police officers during the process. From this experience sources a furious indignation to revolt against these symbols of white power:

> She found herself fascinated by the gun in his holster, the club at his side. She wanted to take that pistol and empty it into his round, red face; to take that club and strike with all her strength against the base of his skull where his cap ended, until that ugly, silky, white man’s hair was matted with blood and brains. (193-4)

The New York in which she lives is no haven from the brutality of the South. The same stereotypes of inherent criminality have created an environment of inevitable abuse and systematic deprival.

Not only is Baldwin’s New York a center for the blind racism that destroys any hope of humane treatment for black Americans, but it is also home to a Harlem which holds no possibility for John’s dream of success. Everyone outside of the Pentecostal church is a figure of failure, presenting a dichotomy of salvation and sin to the young John, who is pushed towards a career in the church to avoid the near-inevitable fate of

imprisonment facing so many black men of the era. Beyond prison, the looming pressure of a crass and purposeless life such as the "men and women [the Grimes] passed on Sunday mornings [who] had spent the night in bars, or in cat houses, or on the streets, or on rooftops, or under the stairs" (10) compels John towards a futile process of personal betterment to push off such a fate, although like Sisyphus, the boulder simply rolls back down the hill again, and the dust settles back onto the newly cleaned rug (27). John is stuck in a social nightmare, without the benefit of improvement or success beyond the church which is forced upon him by his step-father. The recreated Harlem of Baldwin's childhood is a desolate place for an ambitious young man, trapping him within the constraints of his elders' fears and experiences.

John is an inheritor to both general history and familial histories which have placed upon him the pressure to define his identity and his place in the world at the age of fourteen. John is part of a religious lineage among black Americans, beginning with the Christianity of the slaves, who attributed their freedom to being an "answer to the prayers of the faithful" (76). Although he believes himself to be connected to the long line of painful lives held together by religion, John's "mind could not contain the terrible stretch of time that united twelve men fishing by the shores of Galilee, and black men weeping on their knees tonight, and he, a witness" (89). John cannot find comfort in these connections, because he feels himself to be a shameful sinner in his resistance to God. He is therefore an inheritor of the punishments of past sinners too, whose terrifying image drive a mortal fear into his heart as he struggles to reconcile his feelings of disdain for his step-father with his need to fit into the church.

Gabriel Grimes has lived an angry life of vice, and his cruelty has tainted the

lives of all those around him. A womanizer, adulterer, and a drunkard, the young Gabriel had no consideration for anyone in his life besides his mother. Even after becoming a preacher he could not resist sin, and was haunted by his religious crimes: “the whole earth had become a prison for him who fled before the Lord” (154). As a representative of the church, Gabriel’s hypocrisy and cruelty taints religion for John, who is punished by his step-father’s so-called love, shamed for having “the face of Satan” (28), and despised for not being his younger half-brother Roy. As John’s model for manhood, Gabriel also stands as the image of God upon Earth, and it is a hardhearted God that he represents:

> Let them remember this when they thought he was hard, let them remember that the Word was hard, that the way of holiness was a hard way. There was no room in God’s army for a coward heart, no crown awaiting him who put mother, or father, sister, or brother, sweetheart, or friend above God’s will. (16)

Gabriel’s God has shamed the joy out of John’s young heart, forcing him to pretend his belief or face the hypocritical wrath of his step-father. Although he has led a life of vice, Gabriel shows no mercy for those who sin, instead choosing to turn a blind eye to his own mistakes and upbraid others for being “enemies of the Lord” (245).

John is only the latest subject of Gabriel’s disdain, the last to be “made to drink a cup of sorrow” by this the most arrogant of men (242). John is tied into a web of victims of his step-father, women whose lives have been touched and polluted by the self-entitled “Lord’s anointed” (243). The life of Gabriel’s elder sister Florence was essentially forfeit upon his birth, for “[t]here was only one future in [their] house, and it was Gabriel’s—to which, since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be sacrificed” (79). “[M]eat…clothes…indulgence…[and] education” (80) all became his due.

Florence was pushed in jealousy and fury to hate her brother, a hatred which was never overcome and only amplified by his preachership, because "she felt that if Gabriel was the Lord's anointed, she would rather die and endure Hell for all eternity than bow before His altar" (72). Florence's life has been determined by men, and men alone, for even after fleeing the desolate South and her constraining family she is burdened by an aimless husband. Undergoing sexual coercion and the usage of her body by this husband until his death, she came to feel that "all women had been cursed from the cradle; all, in one fashion or another, being given the same cruel destiny, born to suffer the weight of men" (92). Florence is the only check against Gabriel's tyranny, acting as his unwanted conscience to demand that he not forget his crimes, nor continue to enact them.

The family ties which surround John inflame his environment with decades of guilt, shame, and vitriol—it is his inheritance to live in the aftermath of his elders' convoluted past, and to feel his way to manhood and righteousness through the constricting hatred. The setting of Baldwin's youth is heavy with confusion—love looks like violence, doubt is damnable, siblings are enemies, wives have meaning only when their husbands grant it, and fathers are gods. This is his black American family: defined by sin, ensnared by memory, caught between the implications of the past and the fearful possibility of the future. We are given insight into the most liminal of moments for a young man—will he follow the ways of the father? God or Satan? Fear or acceptance? John is a depiction of the precipice of manhood, the identity-defining moment that informs a large part of Baldwin's life. By choosing to immerse himself in the teachings of the Pentecostal church, Baldwin become part of the vast lineage of black American

Christianity which is the legacy of enslavement and collective social control. Baldwin left the faith after three years as a preacher, and this novel stands as testimony to the complexity of his relationship to that inheritance. He presents a critique of the role of religion in the black American family, and a portrayal of how decades of shame and bitterness can estrange a young man from his family, his community, and himself.

Section 2: *Giovanni's Room*

Giovanni's Room depicts another liminal moment in an American life, although the issue of race is not a strong theme in the text, as all main characters are white. The exclusion of racial issues in this novel redirects our attention to the other subjects presented by Baldwin. In eliminating the concerns of color, he instead focuses on the process of discovering the self in its troubling entirety. The need to erase blackness in order to explore this issue implies that there are aspects of color which deeply affect how Americans perceive humanity, our relation to the body and sexuality, and our interactions with loved ones. What takes prominence in this narrative is the concept of the American man and his process of self-definition. The European setting enables him to explore his place between traditional morality and his internal desires, and to discover what influence his nationality has upon his character and his dreams. However, the distance required to examine these things comes at the cost of his sense of belonging:

> "Beautiful logic," I said. "You mean I have a home to go to as long as I don't go there?"
>
> [Giovanni] laughed. "Well, isn't it true? You don't have a home until you leave it and then, when you have left it, you can never go back." (*Giovanni's Room* 116)

The storyline follows the intertwined relationships of the American man in Paris, David, who has taken a male lover, Giovanni, despite having recently proposed to his girlfriend, Hella. She has left for Spain to find herself, and thus David is left to explore the other facets of his sexuality, his ability to commit to love, and to discover what he wants of his life. As an American in Paris, he is at odds with the idea of returning to America without knowing more of himself, and yet cannot fully accept the

idea of his own nationality. While he acknowledges that he is of a "different people" than Europeans (33), he still objects to being othered by his French companions who project stereotypes and expectations upon him:

> I resented….being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called *not* an American because it seemed to make me nothing. (89)

The letters sent to him by his father reconnect him to the expectations awaiting him at home, and underline his sense of guilt for spending so much time "looking at your navel," as his father puts it (91). David is the "American who isn't happy" (164), he has distanced himself from the national image—or perhaps, the national delusion—and turns to discover himself outside of that context.

David must look past his self-deception in order to focus in on his identity, and in doing so he dismisses the facade that encompasses his life. In recognizing that he does not really love Hella, that he merely wanted "something to be moored to" (5) by proposing to her, David accepts the freedom to face his real self. He has been trying to suppress his desires, homosexual and otherwise, in favor of a misogynist traditional image of love between a man and a woman, of the type of marriage that would define him and Hella rather than their defining the marriage. Hella, too, desires "to be a woman" (163), to be David's "obedient and most loving servant" (126) and fulfill the most readily available American image. Neither can escape the pressures of the American dream—it has pronounced their roles in the world, and by resisting them, they are deprived of a concrete sense of self:

> Yet it was true…I wanted children. I wanted to be inside again, with the light and safety, with my manhood unquestioned, watching my woman put my children to bed. I wanted the same bed at night and the same

> arms and I wanted to rise in the morning knowing where I was. I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be renewed. It had been so once; it had almost been so once. I could make it so again, I could make it real. It only demanded a short, hard strength for me to become myself again. (104)

This conventional image of life is comforting in its delineation of gender roles; without the clarity of purpose it presents, David and Hella are disoriented and without direction. Although each simply wished to use the other to fulfill these gender expectations, neither wants to fully disconnect from their constraints.

Again and again, David struggles with the clash between his concept of gender roles and the reality of his homosexual relationship. When he found "a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni," he would stifle the pleasure with the thought that "men can never be housewives" (88). After meeting some of the gay men who prefer to be called "'she'" or dress in women's clothes, David denies their humanity by likening seeing them to "the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement….[People] might not mind so much if monkeys did not—so grotesquely—resemble human beings" (27). In his desire for men, David feels that he has lost the sense of his own masculinity, and he projects his shame onto other gay men. This insecurity repulses him away from Giovanni, whose touch he comes to dread. David confronts his real self through his relationship with Giovanni, but is unable to devote himself because of this emotional distancing. Their friend Jacques warns David that he must respect their relationship by accepting and returning Giovanni's love, lest their liaison become "ashes in [David's] mouth (56-7). Even as David resists Giovanni, Giovanni becomes more dependent upon him, more eager to display his affection in the face of gradual rejection. Giovanni's desperate passion to connect with David manifests in his efforts to transform his room to make it more beautiful and acceptable to David. The room becomes the

symbol of their state of push-and-pull, of Giovanni's efforts to hold them together in spite of David's revulsion and self-hate.

> It was hard work, it was insane work, but I did not have the energy or the heart to stop him. In a way he was doing it for me, to prove his love for me. He wanted me to stay in the room with him. Perhaps he was trying, with his own strength, to push back the encroaching walls, without, however, having the walls fall down. (114)

The room for David stands diametrically opposed to his American dreams, representing a future which would require him to cast off all other aspects of his identity and to become a new David. He is caught between these two futures, each demanding sacrifices and compromises which he is unwilling to make. Giovanni senses David's conflicted state and his desire to escape from the constraint of their room, and thus hopes to change the room and himself to better suit David, to bind them together. Giovanni must balance this expansion with the possibility of collapse, a constant strain which caused "anguish and fear [to]become the surface on which [they] slipped and slid" (75).

The tension between David and Giovanni builds as Hella's return from Spain looms, and David is pushed closer to leaving his lover. David embraces passivity as her return approaches—"I felt a certain relief. It seemed that the necessity for decision had been taken from my hands" (94). And yet, David labors under a heavy guilt while waiting for Hella, feeling that by refusing to abruptly sever this affair, he and Giovanni are "committing the longer and lesser and more perpetual murder" (118). Their love is mixed with a bitterness from both sides: Giovanni hates David for his unwillingness to return his love, and David cannot accept the part of himself that would make a future with Giovanni. Giovanni accuses David of leaving him for the sake of his "lying little

moralities," to preserve some image of himself as a "little virgin….clean…[from] the stink of love" (141). David wishes to choose the delusion he was raised in, to marry Hella, for he can see no real possibility beyond his misogynistic perception of relationships:

> "What kind of life can we have in this room?—this filthy little room. What kind of life can two men have together, anyway? All this love you talk about—isn't it just that you want to be made to feel strong? You want to go out and be the big laborer and bring home the money, and you want me to stay here and wash the dishes and cook the food and clean this miserable closet of room and kiss you when you come in through that door and lie with you at night and be your little *girl*. That's what you want. That's what you mean and that's *all* you mean when you say you love me." (142)

David does not want to face the possibility of life with Giovanni, to overcome his vision of life and carve out a new type of love for them both. Instead, he chooses to remain in the prejudice of his upbringing, to return home and become the American man again.

However, once reunited with Hella, he is unable to connect with her to fulfill the role he wishes for himself. Although David has escaped Giovanni's presence, "in fleeing from his body, [David] confirmed and perpetuated his body's power over [himself]" (144). Full of guilt at Giovanni's desperate fate, he carelessly reveals his affair to Hella, and her disgust is his revelation to redefine what manhood means to him. Hella decides that she will not be one of the "women who have forgotten that to be a woman doesn't simply mean humiliation, doesn't simply mean bitterness" (163). She means to find herself again, reassert her dignity, and to become the woman she wants to be. By depriving David of her role as the conventional woman and wife, she leaves him alone to reckon with his "body, which is under sentence of death" (168). He realizes that he must redeem himself with the "salt of [his] life," that he must move forward out

of this his darkest moment, and renew himself with the “heavy grace of God” (169).

Baldwin’s portrayal of the American experience abroad is the process of discovering the self separate from the national identity. Paris stands as the site to lay down the burden of Americana, to release the facade of conventional expectations to discover what lies beneath. But the process which he depicts is not complete with the mere identification of desire—we must also reckon with the significant relationship between these needs and our new identities. Like David, we may try and fail to reject ourselves and turn a blind eye to our experiences. We may choose to turn back, but home may no longer be waiting for us. The American in Paris is a new creature, strung between two countries and two identities, and he must create a new conception of life in accepting this liminality.

Section 3: *Another Country*

Another Country combines themes from the previous two works into a complex plot which interweaves personal histories, family connections, sexuality, and race issues. The narrative initially follows Rufus, an extremely isolated man who is tormented by the effects of racism upon his life. He is unable to bear the shame of his color or his bisexuality, and in the depths of his self-hatred, he commits suicide. He is, however, the connection point for the other main characters, who must learn to live with themselves after Rufus' suicide. In *Another Country*, Baldwin illustrates the interconnectedness of the social fabric of American friends, lovers, and family members who all struggle to find and accept their places in the world. Their moment in space and time conjoins personal racial experiences, marriage and infidelity, and questions of sexuality into an elaborate plot of self-discovery and self-assertion. These characters exist in a psychological No Man's Land—they do not belong anywhere, they are bound by their pasts and the future offers them nothing. They act blindly, for after fruitless years of pursuing their dream selves, they give themselves up to urges and risky impulse. By abandoning their former selves and ideals, these characters work to reorient themselves in their worlds.

Rufus is a skilled jazz drummer who lives under the constant burden of racial consciousness. He sees "the beauty of black people," feels indignant at "the money…made on black flesh…[that] the whole world made" (*Another* 7), but feels that he might be "ashamed of being black" (28) in his attraction to white women. He has internalized a lifetime of racial abuse and bigotry, and he turns to express this hatred through violent sexual control of white bodies. Rufus is irresistibly drawn to Leona, a

white woman who has fled her life in the South and who is a perfect victim for Rufus' expression of violent self-hatred. Their relationship is a brutal torrent of violence, rape, and shame as they fail to coexist under the immense weight of their racial identities.

> Sometimes, when she said that there was nothing wrong in being colored, he answered,
>
> "Not if you a hard-up white lady."
>
> The first time he said this, she winced and said nothing. The second time she slapped him. And he slapped her. They fought all the time. They fought each other with their hands and their voices and then with their bodies: and the one storm was like the other. Many times—…—he had, suddenly, without knowing that he was going to, thrown the whimpering, terrified Leona onto the bed, the floor, pinned her against a table or wall; she beat at him, weakly, moaning, unutterably abject; he twisted his fingers in her long pale hair and used her in whatever way he felt would humiliate her most. (53)

They pursue a mutual destruction in their self-hatred: Rufus drives Leona to insanity with his abuse, and after he commits her, the pressure of this blood debt swallows him in a deep depression. He owns his crimes, because for him "[i]t's not possible to forget anybody you've destroyed" (51), but he cannot move on from his guilt to find value in his own life. Ashamed of his sexuality and full of violent self-hatred, he reaches out to friends on the day of his suicide, but they are not able to help him forgive himself. While he projects a facade of trying to move forward in his life, he cannot conceptualize actually doing so. His longtime friend Cass warns that he must try to understand why he destroyed Leona in order to forgive himself, lest he "never be able to forgive anybody else and [ ] go on committing the same crimes forever" (79). But, the burden of his past crimes and the burden of existing as a black man have distanced him so far from life as to make it impossible to continue. He jumps off a bridge to face that "*Godalmighty bastard*" with fury (87). Rufus' suicide is the culmination of a lifetime of internalized

hatred—for his color, for his sexuality, for his mistakes. However, his death does not rid the world of his hatred and shame—it is carried on in his social circle, in the guilt of his sister and friends and lovers. Rufus' death sparks their self-reflections, and shifts their relationships irrevocably.

The most profound effect of Rufus' death is upon his sister Ida, a race-conscious woman who holds the white world responsible for her brother's tormented life. Ida takes pride in the struggles she has faced and in the horrors of black history which are her inheritance. She recognizes what life is for black people, and takes the offense against those who would bring her down:

> Even when she was being friendly there was something in her manner, in her voice, which carried a warning; she was always waiting for the veiled insult or the lewd suggestion. And she had good reason for it, she was not being fantastical or perverse. It was the way the world treated girls with bad reputations and every colored girl had been born with one. (144)

Ida carries a race grudge for her brother, and while she does not openly hate the white people in her social circle, she despises the memory of Leona as being the catalyst for her brother's misery. She is frank in her feelings about white people, and does not allow her relationship with Rufus' white best friend, Vivaldo, to obscure her strong feelings about the racist world which surrounds her. Her sense of self is defined by her harsh image of race relations which she has learned after a lifetime of harassment and prejudice. The death of her brother places Ida outside of American life—she can see the broken system in which she exists, and decides that she must "get through the world, and get what [she] needed out of it, no matter what" (417). She rejects white American standards in favor of her own morality, because to continue in that white system would mean the sacrifice of her identity and of the memory of the blood debt owed her.

Although she was pronounced in her racial consciousness before, following Rufus' death Ida makes a choice to be more vocal about the blatant racism in America, to hold white people accountable for their willful ignorance of and silent compliance with everyday racism. Ida strongly resists the image of the American dream as a consolation prize meant to disguise the injustices of life as a black American:

> …wouldn't you hate all white people if they kept you in prison here?…They keep you here because you're black, the filthy, white cock suckers, while they go around jerking themselves off with all that jazz about the land of the free and the home of the brave. And they want you to jerk yourself off with that same music, too, only, keep your distance. Some days, honey, I wish I could turn myself into one big fist and grind this miserable country to powder. Some days, I don't believe it has a right to exist. (351)

Ida is deeply bitter about the state of existence for black people in America, and in her grief for Rufus, she has a real, painful example to illustrate this reality to her white social circle. She holds her friends accountable for their perspectives on blackness, often pointing out that they have no right to judge black people because they have no way to understand what life is like for them in white America.

Ida faces these issues of white blindness most often with Rufus' past teacher and his wife, Richard and Cass, and with Vivaldo. While Richard considers himself color-blind and strongly believes that he can "look on [Rufus] as just another guy" outside of his black identity, Cass feels that they "don't know enough to be able to judge him" after his death (107). Cass cannot let go of her sense of guilt for not reaching out more strongly to Rufus on the night of his suicide, and her sense of being implicated in his death opens her up to the experiences of the black people around her. While Cass feels that the same pain is shared by all humanity, she recognizes the role of color in defining the meaning of that pain, of being the sole origin for the inherent struggle of black life.

But even with this sympathetic outlook, when Cass tries to befriend Ida, she aggravates Ida's sense of justice and desire to make the reality of black life known. While Cass recognizes the difference of background and even shares some of the same pain as Ida, Ida makes clear that the type of suffering undergone by black Americans is by no means universal. Cass and Ida share a moment of honest communication about their racial perspectives, during which Ida tears down the delusions which Cass has built up in her life. Cass lives in a world of privilege, where she does not have to face the degree of hardship that exists for Americans of color, and Ida spells out this fact for her. Cass is not innocent, despite her claims that she "never had a chance to find out" what life was like for black people, that she might "deserve some credit, for trying to be human, for not being a part of all that" (348). Cass simply does not see the life of millions of black Americans, but try as she might to understand it, Ida denies her any realistic access:

> "…my brother would still be alive if he hadn't been born black."
>
> "I guess I don't know if that's true or not," Cass said, slowly, "but I guess I don't have any right to say it *isn't* true."
>
> "No, baby, you sure don't," Ida said, "not unless you're really willing to ask yourself how *you'd* have made it, if they'd dumped on you what they dumped on Rufus. And you can't ask yourself that question because there's no way in the world for you to know what Rufus went through, not in this world, not as long as you're white." She smiled. It was the saddest smile Cass had ever seen. "That's right, baby. That's where it's at." (351)

Ida knows the slow death that really killed Rufus, and she knows that this build up of fury and self-hatred cannot be communicated to those who have never experienced it. She gives some value to Cass' ability to own up to her lack of awareness, but it is not enough to bridge the gap between them.

This gap surrounds Ida in her entire social circle, but it is particularly wide

between her and her white boyfriend, Vivaldo, Rufus' best friend. Like Cass, Vivaldo is blind to the real pain of black life despite his apparent openness and sympathy towards the black community. Vivaldo is reluctant to believe in the constant struggle that black people face in their everyday interactions with whites, even when Rufus tells him of this constant battle to "be treated like a man" (68). Vivaldo considers himself to be an exception to white racism since he does not feel superior to the black people around him, and so is reluctant to think that "everybody's like that" (68). Vivaldo's racism comes in the form of downplaying the experiences of his black friends out of a desire to be free from the guilt of recognizing this struggle. He is "tired of Rufus' story…tired of friendship…tired of the troubles of real people" (71) and wishes to turn inwards towards his writings and his own perceptions of the world. Vivaldo does not understand the inherent violence in being black, nor the rage which this creates in black men who resent the white world for belittling their existence:

> It scarcely seemed possible—it scarcely, even, seemed fair—that colored boys who were beaten up in high school could grow up into colored men who wanted to beat up everyone in sight, including, or perhaps especially, people who had never, one way or another, given them a thought. (61)

Because he does not consider himself a part of the white problem, Vivaldo does not examine or criticize his own conception of black life. He is satisfied with his own sympathetic outlook and does not deeply examine how his whiteness has enabled him to live a life uncomplicated by the need to assert his right to exist. While he witnesses the rage inspired in his best friend by a lifetime of racism, Vivaldo cannot grasp this burden. He cannot experience this type of hate himself, he can only be a bystander to it. His only exposure is through the eyes of a friend, but he resists accepting Rufus'

feelings since it would require him to come to terms with a completely new worldview, and his own possible guilt in that world.

Vivaldo's attitude towards black experiences shifts somewhat in his relationship with Ida. Their romantic relationship exposes him to more of the daily experiences of a black American, and the particular difficulties of black womanhood. Although they are in love, their relationship is saturated with tension springing from the differences in their personal backgrounds. Ida depicts black life as a sort of half-life, because black Americans cannot truly belong in America, nor can they truly fit in anywhere else, and so must exist as foreigners in their own homeland. Vivaldo cannot fully appreciate the denigration that comes along with such an existence, and in fact has a tendency to romanticize and fetishize the black community. He enjoys wandering in the streets of Harlem alone in order to feel like an outsider in his city, to reverse the color dynamic so that he is now the liminal character on the verge of black society. Vivaldo associates these ventures with "rage and self-congratulation and sexual excitement, with danger" (132): they are thrilling in the sense of alienation they give him. He gradually becomes conscious of the judgement facing him from residents of Harlem, who look upon him as a "poor white boy in trouble…[who had] come running to the niggers," a choice which is "not in the least original" (133). He flees to the 'exotic' side of town to escape his own self-consciousness, but he cannot leave behind a guilty feeling that he is merely using black people to define himself and his own manhood. This exoticization even extends into his sexual relationship with Ida, as Vivaldo likens the experience to exploring a "black, dangerous" "savage, jungle river" (177). His relationship with Ida is tainted by feelings of guilt and by his presumptive fascination with the black

community, but she is quick to dismantle his delusions.

Their interracial relationship is complicated by their vastly different views of the world and the role of color within it. They are estranged from each other by these differences, and while Vivaldo struggles to understand Ida's perspective, she withdraws from his efforts. Ida is a skilled singer, and when Vivaldo is exposed to her repertoire of African-American songs, he is dismayed by their inscrutable depth of meaning.

> What in the world did these songs mean to her? For he knew that she often sang them in order to flaunt before him privacies which he could never hope to penetrate and to convey accusations which he could never hope to decipher, much less deny. And yet, if he could enter this secret place, he would, by that act, be released forever from the power of her accusations. His presence in these strange and grimmest of sanctuaries would prove his right to be there; in the same way that the prince, having outwitted all the dangers and slaughtered the lion, is ushered into the presence of his bride, the princess. (313)

Vivaldo feels that he must earn his way to her soul by connecting with these hidden messages, by deciphering the mystery that is her black womanhood. He is taunted by the distance between them as he struggles to own and control her in some meaningful way. Instead, Ida commands her own agency by underlining the psychological remove between them. She does not submit to or accept his love fully, because she feels that he cannot "love somebody [he doesn't] know anything about" (323). Their perspectives on interracial relationships are completely opposed, because Vivaldo wants to "spend the rest of [his] life finding out" about Ida (323), but she knows that their "being together doesn't change the world" (324), no matter what their intentions are. Ida knows that they are trapped within their context, in a world which does not want them together. Their differences are too great because of the racial moment that surrounds them in America, and she believes that they cannot overcome this:

> "But, imagine," Ida was saying, "that he came, *that* man who's *your* man—because you always know, and he damn sure don't come every day—and there wasn't any place for you to walk out of or into, because he came too late. And no matter when he arrived he would have been too late—because too much had happened by the time you were born, let alone by the time you met each other." (349)

Ida cannot even consider the possibility of leaving America to be with Vivaldo in a more accepting setting, because she feels that their time together is forever limited. Love is not enough to keep them from tearing each other down, and they can't outrun their memories or their internalized beliefs. Vivaldo's guilt and racism are constantly at odds with Ida's righteous anger and sense of self. They only truly connect with each other after Ida admits her infidelity, and explains how she has lived in this white world which has such power over her. It is then that Vivaldo realizes the reality of life as a black American woman, and in losing his "innocence" (431), they can start again on a new level of understanding and acceptance.

Infidelity is a thematic means of self-discovery throughout this novel, and it appears again in the affair between Eric, one of Rufus' past lovers, and Cass, Richard's wife. Eric is the classic figure of the American in Paris—he is a skilled but underemployed actor who has fled a painful past and begun a relationship with a man in France. Having built a stable relationship with Yves in France, he returns to New York for film opportunities and must face the aftermath of Rufus' death among his old social circle. He arrives back in the US in a moment of transition for his friends, and he becomes a source of change and of level-headed communication. Eric stands as a point of comparison to the other Americans—having gone abroad to change his life, he returns as a man with purpose and a sense of self that far exceeds the confusions and strife that characterize those around him.

Eric chose to leave New York to escape Rufus, who had abused and punished Eric during their relationship as much as he did with Leona. Rufus hated his own sexuality and his own manhood, and so he "despised Eric's manhood by treating him as a woman, by telling him how inferior he was to a woman, by treating him as nothing more than a hideous sexual deformity" (46). Rufus could not stand Eric's love, and so he pushed him out of his life. In the tradition of so many American expatriates, Eric fled to France to come to terms with his identity, and to find himself in a new context. In France he met Yves, a young, starving, and "violated urchin" (214) on the streets of Chartres. Through their gentle and patient courtship, Eric is able to rediscover a love for himself and come to terms with his sexuality and his past. He was immediately infatuated by Yves upon their meeting, for they were brought together under the influence of 'Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto' (215) which Yves was playing on the street out of a radio. After wandering together and deciding to get dinner, Yves slowly accepts that Eric is "not trying to strike with him the common, brutal bargain…to throw him into bed" (218), but instead trying to honestly get to know this man in a foreign land. Being accepted by Yves, Eric realizes that he must make changes in the way he thinks about himself in order to be truly open to another man. He must "cease violating himself: if *he* did not love himself, then Yves would never be able to love him, either" (215). Eric chooses to leave behind the pain of his past, which feeds upon the homophobia that he has internalized during his sexual self-discovery.

Eric first discovered that he was attracted to men in his teens, with a childhood friend LeRoy who lived in the same town in Alabama. Mocked and shamed by the townspeople for merely being friends with this black boy, their time together was filled

with confusions of power dynamics and desire. Eric defies the expectations placed before him by his “class and…reputation” by befriending LeRoy, but he is not immune to the feeling that there is “something absolutely humiliating in [Eric’s] position” (202). LeRoy is known for having homosexual encounters by the townspeople, but Eric is ignorant of this fact. For Eric, there is merely something “between them…something unspeakable, undone, and hideously desired” which pulls them to each other (203). Eric has never been exposed to the idea of homosexuality, but he is irresistibly attracted to his friend, and so he does not understand the enmity they face beyond the usual disapproval of interracial friendships. It is only after their first sexual experience together that he is able to understand the hate surrounding them and what it would mean for himself:

> Many years were to pass before he could begin to accept what he, that day, in those arms, with the stream whispering in his ear, discovered; and yet that day was the beginning of his life as a man. What has always been hidden was to him, that day, revealed and it did not matter that, fifteen years later, he sat in an armchair, overlooking a foreign sea, still struggling to find the grace which would allow him to bear that revelation. For the meaning of revelation is that what is revealed is true, and must be borne. (206)

Even after leaving behind the hostility of Alabama, Eric is actively working to accept and love himself and his sexuality, and it is this process of self-love that makes his affection for Yves so meaningful. Eric loves Yves, and through this love, Yves realizes that he does not have to “be a whore just because [he] come[s] from whores” (208). Yves is able to “make love” (208) with Eric, rather than turn to the emptiness of prostitution. Eric’s self-acceptance is contagious, and in learning to be happy with himself, he is able to create a sincere love with Yves. He returns to America a changed man, open in his sexuality and frank in his discussion of the self among his social

group.

Eric returns to America a changed man—he is now the expatriate, the dispossessed American. He brings a new perspective to the impersonal city, and finds that he must redefine what 'home' now means to him. Eric is returning to pursue an opportunity on Broadway, but it is not a simple business trip—it will decide what path his life is to take and define his new relationship to America. "To accept [the position] was to bring his European sojourn to an end; not to accept it was to transform his sojourn into exile" (184). As an American in France, Eric has become a new animal—he is neither here nor there, neither American nor foreign, and so he must find a new place for himself in the world. He chooses to follow this professional opportunity and to return to those fears which he had "buried beneath the impossible language of time" (197). He has suppressed the part of himself that is attached to America and associated with his "fantasies of love [which had] soured imperceptibly into fantasies of violence and humiliation" there (197). As a young bisexual man, his entire childhood had been a process of shame and secret fantasy, and in returning to America, he must face these memories with the new sense of self engendered in France.

Retuning to New York and his old social circle, Eric is steeped in the fear that stems from a feeling of being an "unbearably odd and visible" interloper (248). Having never fit in during his adolescence, he is still intimidated by phantasms of a "mob…laughing and calling him names" (248). Back in New York, he is alone for the first time in years, and to be without Yves is to be without "his only frame of reference and his only means of navigation" (228). Eric is away from the leisure of France, stranded in a vast impersonal city which runs on money and deprives its residents of

their human need to “renew themselves” (316). New York City is truly that urban jungle, careless of its citizens and cruelly self-obsessed:

> New York seemed very strange indeed. It might, almost, for strange barbarity of manner and custom, for the sense of danger and horror barely sleeping beneath the rough, gregarious surface, have been some impenetrably exotic city of the East. So superbly was it in the present that it seemed to have nothing to do with the passage of time: time might have dismissed it as thoroughly as it had dismissed Carthage and Pompeii. It seemed to have no sense of the exigencies of human life; it was so familiar and so public that it became, at last, the most despairingly private of cities. (230)

Eric’s one-time home has become a foreign land to him: he is estranged from the way of life there. He has become the outsider who sees clearly the city’s destructive power over its inhabitants. It is only through reconnection with his old group of friends that he feels that “one day, again, he might be one of them” (267), an American.

Eric returns to New York in the midst of a transitional moment for his friends, who are readjusting after the death of Rufus and a necessary reassessment of their own lives. Cass is feeling particularly irresolute towards the life she has created with her husband Richard, and is dissatisfied with his artistic failures as a writer. She feels that Richard has no real genius, that he has sold out his message in exchange for success and is therefore repulsed by his lack of integrity. Although “her life had taken shape around him” (107), she is distanced by her ideological discordance with Richard and she begins to regret having made him so reliant upon her. While some of her friends, such as Ida, cannot understand why she would withdraw from her husband just as “he’s really starting to get someplace” (323) and sacrifice “her virtue, and her safety” (345), Cass is not satisfied with the person she has become in her marriage to Richard. Her entire adult life has been determined by this man, the meaning of her existence determined by the

misogynist attitudes which assert that "[m]en have to think about so many things….[but] [w]omen only have to think about men" (276). Her personhood has been swallowed up in supporting Richard, and so Cass rebels against the burden of their time together. She no longer feels like a woman in his presence, nor even a person—she is a "ghost" in their home (370). Cass begins to wander the streets of New York at night, watching movies alone or drinking in clubs with friends, often lusting after strange men of color as a means to access to other ways of life. One night after wandering alone, Cass turns to Eric for distraction and comfort, and finds a lover who renews her sense of womanhood.

There is certain danger in Cass' affair with Eric. While she needs to rediscover herself as much as the rest of her friends, she has much more to lose—decades of marriage, two sons, and the entirety of her personal history built around her marriage. From the very beginning of her affair, she realizes how easily it could become a way of life:

> She felt his violence and his uncertainty, and this made him seem much younger than she. And this excited her in a way that she had never been excited before; she glimpsed, for the first time, the force that drove older women to younger men; and then she was frightened. She was frightened because she had never before found herself playing so anomalous a role and because nothing in her experience had ever suggested that her body could become a trap for boys, and the tomb of her self-esteem. She had embarked on a voyage which might end years from now in some horrible villa, near a blue sea, with some unspeakably, unspeakably phallic, Turk or Spaniard or Jew or Greek or Arabian. (287-8)

By opening herself up to the lust she feels for Eric, she discovers a possible self which is both tempting and horrifying. This urge to continue in these types of affairs forever places her in an entirely different realm of existence. Her old self, wife and mother, is othered—Cass feels that she could leave herself behind and become a new woman in a

new land. She has broken out of the dream world she had been living in before Rufus' death, and finds that she desires a self-centered indulgence far distant from her prescribed role as a virtuous white American wife and mother. She craves the exotic, that which is forbidden her: foreign men, foreign lands, and a life of sensuality. Eric has provided an awakening that causes her to have an ideological repulsion from her formerly average life. However, her time with Eric is limited by the impending arrival of Yves from France. Much like Giovanni's room, Cass' affair with Eric is a transitional passage through which she discovers what she really desires in her relationships and in her life. She desires a lifestyle in which men revolve around her, rather than being defined by the man in her life. In her encounter with the outsider American Eric, she is able to distance herself from her past and assert a new self which demands more from her own existence.

The complex relationships in this social circle are dominated by the urge to discover the self, both within the context of these social connections and independent of them. The death of Rufus has forced each of his living friends to come to terms with their personal histories. The past is a shared burden that must be explored and understood in order to find one's real self. These are liminal characters: stuck between the ties of the past and the possibilities of the future; innocent of the past crimes of their race but guilty of new ones; bound to others, but utterly alone. They must discover what their identities are—what does it mean to be American? To be black? or white? or in love? They explore these identities through their relationships and friendships, and must learn to accept the differences of experience and perception that create conflicting world views. Vivaldo learns what black womanhood is—Ida learns to share herself with him.

Richard learns the repercussions of sacrificing artistic integrity—Cass learns that she needs more for herself than an empty marriage—Eric accepts the pain of his past, and moves forward with the love of his life, Yves. Each of these characters has undergone a transformation of perspective and understanding of themselves and of those that they love. Baldwin's Americans can only make sense of their identities in the context of each other. They are deeply interconnected, for they share different aspects of the same national inheritance. Each must own their part in this inheritance in order to move out of their liminal moment and grow into their real selves.

Conclusion

Baldwin's three novels depict the problems of identity faced by both black and white Americans, particularly the struggle to define the self in spite of the boundaries laid down for them. His American characters are fighting to find themselves amid all of the expectations that have previously defined their lives. The American identity is enforced by the traditions of the Dream—one must follow the prescribed path to become a dutiful citizen, never questioning that role, nor looking for meaning outside of it. They are burdened by the sense of history that this Dream entails: the personal history of our families, the shared history of society, and the relationships of our past, each pushing us to fulfill a certain role. Baldwin's Americans rebel against these preconceived roles, but they are not immune to the destructive shame that accompanies this rebellion. Having lived under the pressure of Americana for their entire lives, those who defy its standards still face guilty feelings at their failure to accept and play their traditional roles, usually leading to self-hatred. In order to rule renew themselves, Baldwin's Americans must break with tradition and disregard expectation through whatever means, such as expatriation, infidelity, exploration of sexuality, or social defiance. However, the path to self-assertion is not so clear for black Americans, because they face particular problems beyond those of their white countrymen. They face demoralizing crime and vulgarity in everyday life and crushing oppression in every form, which creates an hateful atmosphere, telling them that they are worthless. Black American self-esteems are sacrificed to the American traditional system, and Baldwin's black characters have no sympathy for whites who cannot see this extra burden. Whether the whites around them consider themselves color-blind, or if they find blacks

beautifully exotic, and even if they consider themselves allies, they are still privy to the privilege of whiteness and thus deserving of disdain. A lifetime of bigotry creates an emotional and psychological distance between black and white peers, which can only be overcome by stepping outside of one's comfort zone. The American identity as portrayed by Baldwin is reliant upon the interconnectedness of all citizens—thus we cannot hope to recreate ourselves without each other. We must move beyond our definitions of sexuality, of nationality, of race, and delve into the depths of empathy in order to reconnect. To move beyond our moment of liminality, we must abandon our old selves and move into the future: a future shaped by our common experiences and by our common humanity.

Chapter 3: William Gardner Smith

Although he is not the most well-known of black American expatriates, William Gardner Smith is a notable author within the black protest novel tradition, as well as a distinguished international journalist. His relationship with Europe began after he was drafted in 1946 and served in Berlin as a typist (Fabre 239). There, he found that American soldiers "treated the conquered Nazis better than…Negro soldiers" (239). After returning home and marrying, Smith realized that he wanted to travel and escape the dullness of life within the "black bourgeoisie" of Philadelphia (239). Smith made a plan to return to France in 1951, which was motivated by a number of influences: the experiences of Richard Wright; his French literature studies in high school; and the reputation of Paris as a safe haven for black Americans (239). Once in France with his wife, Mary, they struggled to find work to maintain a comfortable lifestyle, and she returned home after only three months, eventually filing for divorce (241).

After Mary left, Smith led a life of unglamorous bohemia, often going without enough food but happy to be "living the way I want to live" (242). He was immersed in the black artistic scene in Paris, living a rich intellectual life beyond his physical surroundings. Smith was a disciplined writer, as it was not only his livelihood but a therapeutic resource for self-exploration. Writing was a way to express the anger of his past American life, and to move forward into a new period of creation and growth (244). Smith was very much involved in racial and political progress movements both at home and in France. A member of the NAACP and a Communist-leaning activist in the States, he was strongly affected by the racism in Paris during the Algerian rebellion and war. As a journalist at the Agence France Presse, he was exposed to everyday reports of

the brutality against the Algerian Liberation Front, and had a front-row view to the escalation of conflict in Algeria and its repercussions in France (248). Although unable to denounce the French colonizing forces due to the risk of expulsion from the country, he was one of few authors in the era to write an account of the 1961 Paris massacre of hundreds of peaceful Algerian protestors. While the American civil rights movement hit its stride in the 1960's, Smith became involved in the black liberation movement and moved to Ghana, where he helped start a television station (251-2). After the Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown, Smith returned to France and re-immersed himself in the world of journalism (252). He became a sort of spokesman for the black American in the French press, reporting on the state of racial conflict in the United States and the progress of the black liberation movement in Africa (252-253). He was to remain in France for the rest of his life, dying of cancer after 23 years as an expatriate (255). Smith's international experiences contribute to the wide scope of his works, which address a number of international racial issues.

His writings begin as contemporary to the other two authors, but also feature a slightly later stage of the 'Negro Problem' in America. This shift in the temporal setting of his works enables Smith to trace the evolution of different viewpoints on race relations, as well as to predict the results of different ideologies regarding race conflict. His works explore the meaning of blackness in both the American and international context, but they also have a significant focus on questions of status and and self-sovereignty beyond color lines. Smith's characters have a wide variety of racial, national, and political backgrounds which creates a provocative diversity of ideologies and ways of life ranging from blissful ignorance to militancy. Many of his characters

have faced an oppressive past and each must find a way to cope with it: some choose to escape by denying that they ever had a past, but others simply cannot move on from the pain. As Smith portrays it, expatriation is a means of escape from the anger of the past. For some it is a benediction—for others it is a guilty flight from racial responsibility. His black American owes a debt to his community, regardless of how unfair or restrictive the idea may be. He cannot leave behind his nationality because it would mean leaving behind his people, even if he feels he must search for a space to call his own abroad. Smith explores the problems of racial hierarchy, allegiance, and social inclusion in an international context, emphasizing the universality of the struggle to assert the self within an oppressive regime.

Section 1: *South Street*

Smith's novel *South Street* is one of his black militant social protest novels, depicting the lives and conflicts of the black community in Philadelphia. The narrative focuses on the relationships of three black brothers, each of which represent a particular viewpoint on the 'race problem' and how to deal with its effects upon their lives. Bound by a blood debt for their murdered father, each brother must come to terms with their vendetta and decide what role it will have in their future lives. Smith presents a debate upon the meaning of blackness, both among these brothers and among the black community in which they live. The inhabitants of South Street must each cope with their painful pasts and decide whether they will accept or deny the burden of racial responsibility. Although some characters resist race as the defining aspect of their lives, Smith makes clear that one cannot leave the struggle behind. Plans and hopes will always be defied by that ugly beast of racial conflict, which drags you back into the fray just as you have almost escaped. The burden of memory will forever supersede a peaceful life.

The relationships of *South Street* are rather convoluted due to layers of romantic entanglements and friendships which tend to involve the entire community. The three main characters, Claude, Michael, and Philip each live within a separate ideological sphere and are bound together only by their shared vendetta. Claude, the eldest, is a community hero because he has worked for the black liberation movement in Africa. Although he is a former militant, his experiences abroad and at home have pushed him to seek out a peaceful life unburdened by constant racial struggle. Michael, the middle brother, has idolized Claude his entire life and has become a militant himself, even

creating his own racial progress organization. He lacks the wisdom and experience of his brother, however, and is shocked that Claude is no longer interested in battling for the race. Philip, the youngest, is rather detached from his people and from the ambitions of his brothers. He immerses himself in a community of intellectuals to discuss art and literature as a means of insulation from the brutality of black life. Upon returning to South Street, Claude falls in love with a white violinist named Kristin, eventually marrying her despite Michael's outrage and the mockery of his entire community. Their only support comes from another interracial couple, Dan and Suzette, who, despite their non-confrontational attitudes, are still viciously attacked by a white gang. Philip is in love with Margaret, a quiet but passionate woman who has been in love with Claude for most of her life—after Philip finds this out, he ends their relationship, but she becomes enamored with the fiery determination of Michael. However, her enduring love for Claude makes Michael hate her for loving his race-betraying brother, much like Margaret hates Kristin for being a white woman. Unrelated to the three brothers, the relationship between Slim and Lil also involves the South Street community as a whole. Slim is a collector for the local gambling racket and a neighborhood favorite, dating Lil, an abused young woman who rebels against her home life by playing at being a flirt and prostitute. Although their relationship ends, their ongoing bond is observed by the community, particularly Lil's very public behavior afterwards. She becomes involved with Pete, Slim's white boss whose racket pays off the police and promotes inequality within the black neighborhood.

There are two major figures within the South Street community who wield social and political influence, but remain unnamed. They are named only by the role

that they play in the eyes of the community—the Blues Singer and the Old Man. Despite their social connections, they are both deeply lonely. The Blues Singer has a significant influence upon the musical scene in Philadelphia, for she is the deciding factor for success to any up-and-coming musicians. If she decides that "[y]ou'll never be a musician" (*South* 39), her decree is not to be questioned. Her world is music, and the only personal ties she has are to her fellow performers, for "she had no friends" who truly know her (287). The community of musicians on South Street share her perspective on life and music: "[t]hey all floated and smiled the smiles of great, inhuman wisdom" inspired by the depth and meaning of the blues (42-43). Beyond her peers, the Blues Singer lives in perpetual loneliness brought on by her negative outlook towards other people: "…she had had a long chat with Lilac [the dog] about the world in general, the perfidy of men, the bitchery of women and the over-all lousiness of the universe" (38). The Blues Singer isolates herself completely by denying her attraction to women, and therefore eliminating any possibility of a meaningful relationship. She is ashamed of her infatuation with a young woman in a gay club and closes herself off from the threat of love. The Blues Singer's experiences have hardened her against committing herself to any real connection:

> And life went like this: even when you thought you were in love, it was all a lie, nothing but a need, the artificial filling of a vacuum, because, when you got right down to it, there was nobody worth loving, anyway. Life went like this: everybody in this world longed, and longed, and longed for something with all his heart, longed with sad eyes and with tears at night, longed with pains in the lungs, longed with sweat and tired feet; and the something for which one longed could never be found. Because the something did not exist. And the nonexistence of the something: that was the Blues. (287)

Love in life is futile for the Blues Singer, and so she sacrifices this part of herself in

favor of the beautiful misery of her music. She lives as a community figure, with no real individual life—instead of a normal human life, she lives the life of an idol, lonely but respected. As a conscious black woman, the Blues Singer feels she has no choice but to protect herself and go on living.

The Old Man leads a similar life to the Blues Singer, but for very different reasons. He is a political power in Philadelphia, "a neighborhood institution, ancient, eternal: politician, lover of young girls, charmer of old ladies, connoisseur of good whiskies" (76). He is a materialistic man above all, taking pride in his appearance as a well-known and well-loved elder. Despite his sociable habits, he is thoroughly alone. People come to him for advice, for help, for connections, but they do not come for him. The Old Man is a figurehead, valuable in the shallow role he plays but unable to affect any real change. He has distanced himself from race issues, dismissing racial problems as "a myth created by Richard Wright" (17). He does not want to be bothered by the reality of his peoples' lives—he would rather stay on the good side of the white political system. Even when he makes a flimsy attempt to prevent a racist man from gaining power, he is dismissed and readily turns a blind eye to the problem (110-111). While his role as a link between white politicians and the black community is hugely important, he sells his loyalty for comfort, influence, and a magistracy. He enables the cycles of corruption that prevent real progress for the black community; the Old Man is truly a man without integrity.

The power structures encompassing South Street enable the cycles of corruption, violence, and police abuse, which are cultivated in order to suppress the black community. Even among criminals there is a color divide, impinging on wages

collected from Pete's gambling racket. Whites are paid more for the same work, and when Slim requests a raise for the black workers he is met with casual threats of murder (47). This racial abuse is enabled by the police, who accept bribes from Pete so that he can continue to harass and grift as he pleases: 'Sometimes Pete had his men beat people in the Negro neighborhood. He beat people who crossed him, or people whom he accused of trying to "muscle in" on his rackets' (263). This brutality is condoned by the police, who publicly accept bribes and prioritize the maintenance of power above the protection of citizens. Because the white police system places "the worst policemen…in the Negro neighborhoods," they are considered enemies of the people, the most likely and capable of committed crimes against their countrymen (92). Rage and fear has created enormous tensions between black Americans and the police in Philadelphia:

> Brutality had always been a common thing; nothing in the recent years, however, had equaled the pitch to which wanton violence by police against Negroes had now risen….Countless were the times that Negroes, who happened to be in neighborhoods where crimes had just been committed, were seized, beaten, and charged with the crimes, only to be found innocent afterwards; and countless, too, were the innocent men found *guilty* of such crimes, and sent off to jail. No questions of Justice. No questions of Rights. The victims were Negroes: the usual standards did not apply. (93)

The police are only meant to protect the status quo within the black community, never to ensure the safety of its inhabitants. Even in times of gang violence, police are partisan to whites: they let white gangs go "with warnings" and arrest "only members of the Negro gangs" (206). This cycle of abuse is prolonged by the convoluted political system, which functions primarily via endorsement. Even in the case of elections, the winning party brings little new to the table. Elections are won with promises of influence to men like the Old Man, ensuring that the traditional power structure remains

intact. These systems work together to maintain the racial hierarchy, particularly to enable the total freedom of the white man to indiscriminately oppress the black community.

Despite the corruption within their city, the black inhabitants do not allow the white system to demoralize them. Instead, the community on South Street reacts with both racial pride and exclusion of whites. They take ownership of any black leadership and support them with pride, such as cheering on black members of the Dodgers because they are "the real ones," the reason that the team wins (4). Their treatment of Claude is similar, for he is lauded as a hero upon his return from "fighting…for Africa's freedom" as a "racial trouble-shooter" for two years (9). The South Street community celebrates any of their fellows who stand up for the race, but there is a cost for this blind support. Because the black community lives in a constant state of self-defense, it demands racial loyalty from all who belong to it. In the everyday battles between whites and blacks, each is supposed to support his brother no matter who is guilty. Michael is the most active proponent of this race loyalty, for whenever he sees a fellow black man in trouble, he swears that "[t]he Negro would have a brother in defeat…[no] matter *what* the argument was" (55). To Michael, "there did not exist a white man who was without guilt" (59) in America. This nation has an ugly history, and he will not let it be forgotten:

> Land of the Senator: …shrieking his hatred from the august chamber. Land of the Klansman: massed whip and brave white mask….Land of Babbitt: …idiot with monied pockets; tongue calling "darkies" to shine his shoes. Land of the Hypocrite: pious smile of love; word hanging "tolerance";…Superiority entering through the back door. Land of the Smug and Righteous Blind: vacant eyes in clodhopper shoes; kneeling to God; treading. Nation. Bloated ugliness weighted down upon black humans. (59)

The rage inspired in Michael by the horror of American history pushes him to react with blind violence when black men are attacked. Rather than taking a logical approach, he targets "[a]ny white heads" (181) in order to exact revenge. Indiscriminate violence towards blacks has pushed him to extremism, which only worsens race relations. However, all black men in this narrative who carry a sense of pride are affected by the bonds of race. Even Claude, who despises violence, expects his fellows to join him when he is insulted (129). Black men in particular must battle the blind hatred and violence constantly directed at them by whites, and so they have developed this group defense mechanism as the only means of survival against hate crimes. Although it is a necessary tactic, it tends to fuel the blind racism of whites. Such is the case when a young white boy, remembering the apparently unjustified beatings of his friends by a black South Street gang, decides to throw a rock at Philip while he walks down his street. Philip bleeds to death on the sidewalk, and the young boy, horrified, does not go for help. These are the repercussions of blind hatred—the whites oppress and abuse any and all blacks, the blacks retaliate against any whites, and the bitter cycle continues ad infinitum.

The burden of constantly fighting for the race is a heavy one, for it tends to occlude all other concerns in life. Men such as Claude, who are aware of racial discrimination and have fought against it for most of his life, crave the freedom to "be a human being" rather than be weighted down by "bitterness" (69). However, the knowledge that there are "fourteen million…with brown skins who want to be human beings for awhile" too is hard to ignore (217). To defy one's racial duty is to ignore the struggle of one's community and to forget one's past. Although some, like Philip, wish

to lead a life dedicated to art and aesthetic, his world is not ready for a moderate black man. The mantle of racial responsibility is placed upon the black man's shoulders at birth, for his skin marks him as an agent of the resistance against white oppression, whether or not he wishes to take action. His manhood and his pride depend upon his performance of that race duty. Although both Claude and Philip resist this obligation, they are held accountable by pressure from both the community and from Michael. They are all three tied together by the vendetta of their father's gruesome murder, who was "whipped; his entrails cut out; then shot because, in a Southern town, he had been the first who had dared to vote" (59). Michael maintains the bitter hatred of this event, and tries to keep it in the memory of his two brothers. Despite his efforts, Claude and Philip have moved on from the loss of their father, but the pressure to defend the race remains. Philip feels that he is a coward for not wanting to fight alongside every black man in trouble. He comes to believe that 'he had been a victim of the "male" obsession in America' (214), and decides to continue to pursue the arts as an escape from the 'race problem.' Claude turns away from the constant hatred endorsed by Michael by trying to immerse himself in his marriage to Kristin. He is, however, somewhat ashamed of having retired from the struggle. Claude knows that Kristin was a large part of his decision to retire, and the community knows it:

> They go around saying, 'Well, now ain't that just like a colored man, gets hisself a little famous, first thing he does is run off and marry a white woman! Don't never fail. And then he's no more good to his own people! (158)

Claude's interracial relationship struggles to exist in a community so strongly divided by color. His love cannot coexist with the general hatred between whites and blacks, not only because of white violence, but because he must serve his community above all

else.

The four people in interracial relationships on South Street are barely able to survive due to the vicious racial violence of their time. Black-white marriage stands as "a throwing off of racial shackles, a declaration…for universality" which spits in the face of the bigoted system (74). In both couples—Dan and Suzette and Claude and Kristin—the man is black, and thus faces an inherent risk in associating with their wives, let alone being married to them. The aimlessly angry violence of the whites around South Street is usually targeted towards black men, but Dan and Claude are sitting ducks when accompanied by their wives. Beyond the daily threat of violence, the social differences between spouses are just as likely to tear these marriages apart. Suzette is French, and has not lived in a tense racial setting for long. She is culturally naive, often missing social cues that signal danger to Dan—however, they use humor to cope with the difficulties of interracial love, and it seems to work for them. Unfortunately the same tactic does not work for Claude and Kristin. Kristin is also culturally naive, because she has never had to see the discrimination inherent to black life. She considers herself to be color-blind, feeling that color has no relevance to "the worth of a man, his intelligence, his sensitivity, his strength, his bravery, his skill" (204). She is unprepared for the rude awakening that comes with her marriage to Claude, because her life has been untouched by the bitterness of hatred. After their marriage, Claude and Kristin find themselves utterly isolated from both of their racial communities. She is shocked to find that her friends and family abandon her for marrying a black man; upon delving into Claude's community, she is disappointed to find that they, too, "never completely accepted her…for she was outside of [their]

common life experience" (146). The militant blacks are actively vicious towards her, further alienating Claude from his own social circle. Margaret, still in love with Claude, tells Kristin that she cannot "'love' a man whose emotions you can't reach, whose depth is beyond you, whose pain was branded on his skin at birth" (274). Michael sees only a shallow lust for black men in Kristin's marriage to his brother, and so he refuses to speak to her or acknowledge her existence. Because of their isolation, Claude and Kristin entrench themselves within their love, for it is their only connection. They plan to flee to Canada to escape the constant tension of their lives in Philadelphia, but they are foiled by the random manslaughter of Philip. Although Kristin would sacrifice everything to stay with Claude, he knows that the hatred surrounding them will slowly destroy her. He encourages her to continue to Canada, but he must stay to fight against the system of hatred which has killed his brother. His race 'loyalty' is reborn in a new vendetta for the life of Philip, and he cannot retire to peace without resolving that blood debt.

The search for peace is defeated by pointless violence and the burden of racial duty for all of the main characters. The pursuit of universal beauty through literature or music or love or religion is not enough to insulate them from the ugliness of their world. Escapism offers no solace, for hatred and the memory of hatred will always follow. To be black is to be committed to your brother, in family or in color: no one else will stand with you. Smith's portrayal of the black identity demands loyalty whether one wishes to participate or not, for hatred strikes blindly. They must stand together in order to fight back against the systems of racism, and peace cannot be achieved until all can live with dignity and safety.

Section 2: *The Stone Face*

Much as in *South Street*, Smith explores the experiences of a man searching for a peaceful life in his protest novel *The Stone Face*. The narrative follows Simeon Brown, a black American who has successfully fled the violence of America by fleeing to France, the ideal refuge. Although he enjoys a quiet life, Simeon gradually becomes aware that blind hatred is universal, and can be found in every country—just because it is not targeted at you does not mean it is not happening. Smith explores the problems of trying to flee one's past through his presentation of the expatriate community in France. His black American is a conscious man, who cannot bear to ignore international racial conflicts, nor can he fully relinquish his racist home country. Although Smith himself was a permanent expatriate, he presents an exile fraught with race guilt and social confusions. Smith presents a perspective still very much invested in the fate of race relations in America; even in an international setting, Simeon must resist the patterns of racism which threaten the lives and peace of so many.

Simeon flees from his life in America because of the social and economic limitations for black people. He was brought up in a large, impoverished family in Chicago, with all generations under the same roof. Everyone was expected to contribute to the family and help support their paltry home. The standard of living for black people in Chicago is very low, for this large family of workers could barely afford a decrepit home, infested with rats and unheated (*Stone* 24). His home is not the only danger, however: the entire neighborhood is fraught with violence, among blacks and between blacks and poor whites. "Violence was in the streets and in the schools. Individual fights, gang wars, race wars. Inexplicable violence, purposeless violence. Before this

Simon recoiled" (24). Simeon dreads the violence which surrounds him, but is ashamed of his reticent nature. He must maintain face with his peer group, and so he has to teach himself to appear proud: "Simeon had tried to overcome his shyness by a self-hypnotic chant: *You are a prince, you are a prince, you are a prince*" (4). Unfortunately, his peaceful nature is not enough to protect him from the viciousness of blind hatred. After praying to change into a "brave and tough" man even at the cost of "any sacrifice" (25), Simeon is attacked by a Polish gang on the street. This is his first encounter with 'the Stone Face':

> *The man who had this face felt no human emotion, no compassion, no generosity, no wonder, no love!* The face was that of *hatred*: hatred and denial—of everything, of life itself. This was the terrible face of anti-man, of discord, of disharmony with the universe. (27)

The young man with the stone face attacks Simeon, and cuts out one of his eyes. Simeon gets his wish—he is now a man in the eyes of his community. He has made a blood sacrifice to become that prince he desired to be, "[t]ough…mysterious, romantic" in his new black eye patch (29). After his attack, Simeon no longer fears confrontation; he fears his capabilities when faced with the stone face. Later, after he receives a brutal, prolonged beating from a police officer, Simeon buys a gun to protect himself. When he is getting a drink with a white female coworker, he is again attacked, this time by a group of sailors. As he looks in the face of one of his attackers, he sees the stone face; he pulls out his gun and pulls the trigger (54). Luckily, the gun jams, but the effect is complete. While everyone is stunned, Simeon escapes and ditches his gun, for he knows now that he will kill someday, but he does not want that day to come (55). Simeon knows that to kill even in self-defense will mean the end of his own life, and so he decides that he must "go away, leave America. Go where? Anywhere. Europe, for

example. France." (55). A black man in America is not safe even from himself, so he must flee in order to escape the constant threat of self-defense.

Simeon picks Paris on a whim, but he also perceived Paris as a place where "[v]iolence would not be necessary, murder would not be necessary" (3). His Parisian dream holds true for some time after his arrival. In the vivacity of the people of Paris and in the lack of attention to his color, Simeon finds a strange new peace. It is a slow readjustment, for "old reflexes" of defensiveness and wariness "died hard" (35). He expects racism, and so he self-consciously projects it onto many Parisians with whom he interacts. When a French girl denies his offer of a drink, he hates her for "her mocking smile" (6), only to see that she has an African boyfriend. When he and his girlfriend Maria are stared at by an old man, Simeon interrogates him roughly—but, he is merely a painter, admiring Maria's bone structure (67). Simeon's adjustment to his new French freedom is gradual, but he eventually accepts the relative tolerance of Europeans. He begins to immerse himself in the Paris scene, rejuvenating himself in the beauty of French inheritance:

> He liked the faces of the ordinary French people….He read into their eyes dim memories of the French Revolution, the Commune, the Resistance. These things were not forgotten, they were there still in the French people and through them in Simeon. These same eyes expressed humor and the sheer joy of life. (115)

Life in France is calm for Simeon, but it is not totally foreign. He has many friends among the expatriate community, who tend to treat Paris as a libertine escape. He connects with Babe, a black American man who welcomes him as "[o]ne less victim" of America (9), a member of the "new Lost Generation" (10) looking to escape the repression of home. Simeon connects with Babe as a rebel against the racist system,

under the shared history of fleeing for freedom. Paris appears to be the perfect home for Simeon, for he is free to act as any other man, and he has friends who share similar pasts. However, he gradually becomes aware that Paris is not as welcoming to everyone—in fact, his American citizenship may be the only security between him and racist brutality in France.

Simeon is first exposed to Arab-specific racism in France when he is witness to a conflict between an Algerian man and a Dutch girl who had robbed him. Simeon presumes the girl's innocence, and starts a fight with the Algerian; the police show up, and all of the Arab men on the scene are incarcerated. Although the Algerian man has a reasonable explanation for his behavior, the police do not care. Simeon, on the other hand, is treated with respect and dismissed with no punishment. He realizes with guilt that he has been privy to racism, and must answer for his responsibility. Simeon later meets the group of Algerian men on the street, and they open his eyes to the real situation in France. Algeria is fighting for its independence, resulting in some terrorism within France—this has led to immense tension between the state and its colonized peoples. Although he is black, Simeon is privileged because of his nationality. To the Algerians, he has the status of a white man, while they are "the niggers here" (57). The racial hierarchy has shifted, and the usual concerns of color are superseded by concerns of power. Algerian "skins were white, alright" (92), but as victims of colonization and defiers of the "great rich peoples" (93), they are extremely oppressed. Just as in "all the ghettos of the world" (86), the Algerians in France are forced to live in specific neighborhoods full of dilapidated housing, crowded on top of each other "feeling the old unbearable frustration and anger, the fear and defiance" (87) common to all

exploited peoples. Simeon is implicated in the racist system in France because he benefits from it—his people are not on the bottom of the racial pyramid. He and the other expatriates are "students, artists, professional people" (90) insulated from the hardships faced by the Algerians. Simeon believes that "any member of the privilege group in a racist society is considered guilty" (120), and so he must evaluate himself and his behavior in France accordingly. Simeon's experiences with the Algerians reawakens his ardor for racial defense: "There has been a return of buried hatreds; forgotten walls had shot up again between him and the world" (68).

Simeon feels a sense of debt to the oppressed people of color in France, but he does not know how to face this problem. He is prohibited from any political or humanitarian involvement by the threat of expulsion "at the slightest suspicion" (95). Instead, he begins to criticize himself and his social circle for their escapism, and for their blindness to the Algerian problem in France. He wonders why he has never invited any Algerians to a nice restaurant (107); he interrogates his French friends as to how their dislike of Algerians is not, in fact, racism (63); he pushes Babe to see the connection between blacks in America and Algerians in France; he knows that racism is not exclusively black-white, despite the delusions of the French. Simeon feels that expatriates cannot remain blind to the race issues around them, but most of them have come to Paris to avoid such responsibility. Some, like himself, are fleeing painful memories of a racist past. Simeon's girlfriend Maria is a survivor of the WWII internment camps, and has fled war-ruined Poland and the memory of her sacrifices. She has lost her family, was sexually abused by German soldiers, and is gradually going blind—she has come to Paris to make the most of her vision and to pursue her dream of

acting. Maria wishes to lead a life "[c]ut off from the troubles of the world" (129), in a state of willful oblivion to repress her memories. Acting is a means for her to transform herself, the art of becoming another person:

> There would be no little Jewish girl named Maria whose body had been profaned by a monster in a concentration camp, no Maria who turned her eyes away as her parents went off to a horrible death. There would only be that person walking across a screen, living, loving and hating on the screen. (184)

Although Simeon attempts to live the life of peace that Maria needs by trying to convince himself that "the world was what it was…and that there was nothing he could do about it" (168), the pressure of his racial consciousness overpowers him. By refusing to fight for the oppressed, Simeon is deprived of a sense of purpose. It is only after he is witness to atrocities that he is able to return to the struggle for a better life.

While he is in France, Simeon reads about the events at Little Rock in a newspaper. He is struck by one girl, who he dubs Lulu Belle, and her bravery in not showing her fear of the vicious white audience surrounding her. He becomes further ashamed of his comfortable life abroad while "leaving the *fighting* to the little Lulu Belles" (144) at home. Despite this shame, it is difficult for Simeon "to break out" (180) of his easy life in Paris to face the problems in America. It is only after witnessing the struggles of Algerians in France that he becomes truly motivated to return home and perform his racial duty. He sees the organized brutality of the French police, hears accounts of the human rights violations and the nauseating torture faced by female resistance fighters. Simeon is disheartened by the "seeming indifference of the population to what was happening….the concentration camps and the tortures….the filthy slums" (174). The depth of this apathy becomes gravely clear on the day of the

Algerian Massacre. “On October 1, 1961, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) called on all Algerians living in Paris to…hold a peaceful demonstration against the curfew imposed on them by the French Government” (199). Although entire families were present, although they were unarmed, although they were participating in perhaps the most French of traditions, the 30,000 protesting Algerians were brutally attacked by the government-supported police. Simeon watches as they are clubbed to death, shot, and dumped into the Seine; “[m]eanwhile, most of the city slept or went its carefree way” (202). Simeon sees the stone face upon a policeman beating a woman trying to protect her child, and he attacks him—however, Simeon is knocked out and taken to a “sports stadium” with the rest of the protestors (204). Unlike the Algerians, he is released despite his interference. He realizes that he must leave Paris to fight for his own people, to fight the battle that shaped so much of his life.

> Back to the States—not because he liked it, not because his antipathy to that country and its people had changed, not because he felt any less anger or bitterness or frustration at the mere thought of living there again, but because the Lulubelles were there, America’s Algerians were back there, fighting a battle harder than that of any guerrillas in any burnt mountains. Fighting the stone face. (210)

That face is his mortal enemy, and Simeon has finally discovered the strength he needs to fight it. Blind hatred may be universal, but the resistance against that force is just as powerful.

Although Simeon has fled his homeland in pursuit of peace, he cannot forget his oppressive past nor the bond it creates between him and exploited peoples around the world. Through Simeon’s restless search for purpose in a foreign land, Smith depicts the pressure borne of a sense of racial loyalty in a time of uprising and protest. His black American cannot escape this sense of obligation, for to live in peace is to sacrifice

one’s racial identity, nationality, and consciousness. He can find purpose only in fighting for his people: even if he despises violence, it is the only means to win a dignified existence. Although Smith did not return permanently to the States, his message for expatriates is clear—each must act to defeat the stone face, as it is his duty to try to better the world for himself, for his people, and for all tyrannized peoples.

Section 3: *Return to Black America:*

A Negro Reporter's Impressions after 16 Years of Self-Exile

Smith's *Return to Black America* is a mixture of previous publications and contemporary interviews combined into a narrative of the racial situation in mid-to-late-1960's America. Although published in 1970, much of the material stems from Smith's earlier journalistic material in France, as well as from his novels. Smith returns to the States in order to take a survey of the various viewpoints regarding the progression of the 'race problem,' and of the development of new movements. He interviews conservative, pacifist, and militant leaders, international race activists, black nationalists, and the new generation of black youths engaged in the struggle. *Return to Black America* gives a particular insight into the effects of expatriation and the distance it creates between Smith and the black communities across America. Smith has developed a unique perspective on race relations while in France, and although this work focuses on the opinions of others, it also reflects upon Smith's outlook for racial progress in America and his role within that movement.

As an international investigative journalist, Smith faces some roadblocks in his interviews with black activists. Although he is open to all perspectives, he is susceptible to suspicion for his interviews. Some of his interviewees worry about FBI targeting; others do not trust a man they perceive as having abandoned his people; still others believe him ignorant of the current issues because he has been absent so long. Thus Smith must account for his choice to leave, and must explain what ties he still has to his nationality. Sacrificing American comfort for French poverty, Smith chose to expatriate in order to "live in greater peace" (*Return* 71). However, he must come to terms with

the inherent cost of such a move:

> He paid it in a painful tearing of himself from his past, from the things and people he loved or hated but which remained part of him, from which he would never escape despite the miles or the decades separating him from them….He paid for it in guilt….He paid for it, finally, in a sort of rootlessness….The black man, no matter how long he lived in Europe, drifted through those societies an eternal "foreigner" among strangers. (71).

Smith recognizes that he can only truly belong to one country because his history, and the history of his people, lies there. He has tried to pursue freedom from the American inheritance of violent racism, but it follows him across the ocean. Smith must delve back into the fray in order to reconnect with his community at home and to reorient himself within their world views.

Back in the "country born in violence, bred in violence" (185), Smith is a double-outsider: as a black American, he is excluded from certain parts of society; as an expatriate, he has lost touch with the direction of racial progress in America. He has developed a "split personality" (56) due to his youth in America and his adulthood abroad. By reconnecting with the black 'outsiders' in America, he is able to gauge their viewpoints on black nationality and the behavior of whites in other countries. Some black Americans, Smith finds, have turned to their African heritage in order to find a sense of belonging in the world. This "Re-Africanization" is a means of repudiating the "American indoctrination" of blacks, by reclaiming the lost history of ancestors and turning away from American socio-economic values (37). This revision and correction of history is not only an assertion of black identity, but it is also a powerful revocation of colonizing powers. "Africa was Black Power" (95), a nearly-mythic black land to a people oppressed for centuries, where a man "has to be assessed as an individual" (96)

rather than as a member of a race. These black Americans who have reclaimed their African heritage are wary of the white man in all of his iterations. Simply because he is tolerant of blacks in a foreign country does not mean that he is different from his peers—"[t]hey're all potential crackers or Afrikaners if you put them in the right circumstances" (61). Their position as outsiders has given these black Americans a new perspective from which to analyze the world powers, and for some, that has meant the rejection of all things white.

This perspective has also encouraged an international race-consciousness among Smith's interviewees, who have applied their domestic concerns of power and oppression to worldwide conflicts. Many prominent black American leaders travel internationally to speak on issues of race, and to meet with other leaders to discuss mutual issues. These travels transform the approach to race relations, creating a network between progress movements and their leaders. Like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X before him, traveling abroad allows leaders to "see…interconnection with other social movements" firsthand, and to return home with "[a] lot of knowledge about how [black Americans] fit into the world scene" (73). Traveling also allows American leaders to connect with foreign governments, thereby increasing their own influence at home and lending confidence to racial movements through international endorsement. Beyond the leaders, the youths participating in the racial movements developed a similar international consciousness. Conflicts abroad become the catalyst for activism at home, beginning with the generation of black Americans who fought in WWII and found "respect and consideration for the first time…from the former enemy" (42) and continuing through the black Americans fighting in Vietnam, being called "brothers" by

the Vietcong (157). These black youths found that they had strong ties to the experiences of oppressed peoples abroad, and some came to consider their presence in America to be the "condition…of a colony" (45), and that they may fight for their freedom from colonizing powers as well. The acceleration of decolonization had created worldwide tension between colonizer and colonized as new "terrifying tides of…nationalism" rose up within newly sovereign countries. The threat of "new and younger nations" (69) who were opposed to the old powers threatens the Western way of life, deepening pre-existing racism. This results in a transitional moment the world around—the redistribution of power has made room for new national movements, encouraging other colonized peoples to rebel and assert their own identities.

Smith depicts a power shift within the racial progress movements sparked by these revelations of black American youths. The new generation of youth activists has its roots in the gangs founded in the ghettoes of cities such as Philadelphia. Usually defined by 'a special kind of "morality"' code particular to each gang' (30), it gives its members a sense of identity and power. Although gangs are rarely considered positive organizations, the atmosphere of racial activism has transformed the image of gangs since Smith's youth. They have become politically active, and in doing so have lowered the "incidence of antisocial behavior and delinquency" (36) within their communities. The gangs have become activists for the black nationalist movements, working to unify black American movements and subsequently alienating whites, who are viewed as being "guilty until proven innocent" (117). This is a "counter-offensive" (117) against white racism, but also a declaration of blackness as the only identity that they recognize. These proponents of a strong, black image "believe that *active* exaltation of blackness,

plus resentment—to put it mildly—of the whites, are the emotional forces necessary to unite black America in struggle" (118). These black nationalists are against assimilation, for they consider it to be impossible due to the centuries of separation, oppression, and dispossession enacted by white Americans. Black nationalists have found a new power in collective action, and thus is a new revolution born.

In returning to America, Smith found a total cultural shift which he had never expected. Although he had witnessed international racial progress from France, delving into the racial moment in America was a total and surprising immersion into the new militancy and the new black nationalism. After documenting the many perspectives of black activists and leaders, Smith highlights the current of forward movement which has developed back home. However, because of the multiplicity of perspectives and ideologies, he is not sure of the outcome. Political optimism and determination define these movements, but there is no unanimous answer. Will black Americans establish a new, black country within the United States? Will they all 'return' to Africa? Will they have a black-exclusive governing body separate from the US government? Only we, looking back, can know the answers to these questions. However, the extremism expressed by these options is a significant reflection of what Smith found in his "Return to Black America." The possibility of cultural, social, and economic assimilation seems utterly unattainable to him and to his contemporaries. Smith had returned to America in a dire moment of internal tension—blacks are so completely othered from their white countrymen that there is no foreseeable way to coexist. They have organized to resist the white oppressors, under the influence of newly decolonized countries fighting a very different kind of battle. Following the pattern of these countries, black American

movements felt that they must sever all ties if possible, in order to gain total sovereignty. This ideology is a reflection of Smith's expatriation—it is futile to fight within the system, so one must leave it in order to truly live.

Conclusion

The defining feature of Smith's novels is a sense of racial responsibility which ties his black characters to the struggle of their home community. Although some resent this connection as an unwanted pressure assigned at birth, they cannot escape the sense of duty to one's people. Many of his characters reflect Smith's desire for a peaceful life which led him to expatriate, but just as in life, this peace cannot come at the cost of one's consciousness, nor one's identity. Although one may pursue peace by insulating oneself in love, or in art, or in literature, one cannot pretend that the problem doesn't exist, for it will find its way to affect us one way or another. To flee the problem is to ignore our pasts, to forget that which we have lost, and to allow society to continue its oppression undisturbed. Smith presents this as a danger of expatriation: the urge to sequester oneself from the world disconnects us from one's roots, leaving one without purpose and without identity. To remedy this, Smith keeps in touch with the developments at home, for although he has escaped the hateful atmosphere, he cannot abandon those who continue the fight. The suppression of hatred must take priority above a calm personal life, for the corrupted power systems of the world can only be defied through communal effort. Inhuman tyranny must not be abided—fear is a tool in the hands of totalitarian systems, working to keep the oppressed from taking action together. Rather than abandoning one's identity in the face of persecution, Smith argues that the exploited must reassert their right to exist, reclaim erased history, and demand sovereignty. There is power in pride, and by defending one's human value one can recapture dignity for the lives of one's people.

Final Conclusions

There is something distinctive about France which has drawn these three black American authors to devote large portions of their lives to expatriation. It is the image of dignified, peaceful lives which allured these three authors, but because of each man's personal history, the three found very different realities upon arrival. Although the France of their era offered an unparalleled freedom to these black American men, the distance between them and their home country may have been the most valuable feature of expatriation. Wright went to escape the racial war zones of America and the daily offenses of life as a black man—he found a humanist country full of intellectual opportunities, but never fully retired from the struggle. Baldwin saw his identity—and that of many black Americans—restricted at home, boxed in by crime, crudity, and destitution. He craved a life free from shame, where he could be an artist outside of color lines; so he went to France, where he remained in touch with the struggle at home and an active proponent of progress. Smith had a taste of European life during World War II, where he found dignified acceptance. Back at home and hampered by a boring life in the black bourgeoisie, Smith followed his craving for travel and real experience to France. He became an international journalist, tracing the developments of those who remained in the fight back home. France offers a valuable distance between oneself and the battle back home, but it cannot free these men from their ties to their people, for they are rooted in their identities.

The separation of these authors from their home country offers them a unique frame of reference to explore their conception of the black American identity and experience, and in some cases, explore the significant repercussions of expatriation

through their characters. Wright portrays black life in the United States as a constant state of violence and duress created by cycles of fear, impoverishment, and denigration established by the white power system. America is the site of restricted identity for blacks, due to the extreme repression they face in virtually every situation of their lives. His image of the future of black Americans is bleak, characterized by isolation and frustration. Although he cannot escape, Wright's black American has no real bond to his home country—America has stolen his independence, his manhood, and his rights, and expatriation is an unachievable dream. He is a foreigner within his own country. However, Baldwin's American (both black and white) is a foreigner in every country—they are a liminal being, belonging nowhere and between self-conceptions. His American is excluded from the Dream, for any number of reasons: color, career, sexuality, disillusionment. Because of this, they are isolated from their countrymen, but self-consciously aware that there is no other place for them but home. Even when they travel to France, Baldwin's American is only there temporarily in order to explore his identity—he will always return home. This American figure must try to comprehend and accept their ties to the homeland and their countrymen: having been estranged by their experiences, they must overcome this distance in order to find themselves within the American context. Smith's American is the only one who is a foreigner abroad, who is painfully aware that he belongs back among the American people. For his black American, expatriation is a means to ignore a problem, but even then, he cannot leave the internal struggle behind. France is a place for him to recover from the pain of America, and to reorient himself in a freer environment. As a race-conscious man, he is aware of the struggles of his people, as well as those of oppressed peoples around the

world. Because of this cognizance, he feels that he owes his community a debt of action. Not only must he fight against the cycles of exploitation which repress black Americans, but he has a duty to rebel against tyranny wherever he finds it in the world. The distance between these three authors and their home country affords them a new perspective to reflect over their American experience, and reflect it onto their fictional black Americans characters. Although they may not correlate exactly with the actual actions of the author, each American figure has a unique relationship to their country, shaped by the particular racial consciousness of its creator.

While each of these authors has expatriated himself, all three are concerned with the sustainable existence of black people in America. Writing in a time of segregation and violent oppression, these authors explore the issue of whether a psychological, physical, and economical space can be made for black people within America, or if their true homeland lies elsewhere. For Wright, black Americans must fight against the repressive system in order to create a space for themselves, but it will be a long and vicious fight. In his America, blacks must fight constantly for their lives , for dignity, and for the right to exist at all. Those who survive are those who have found power—in community, in political revolutions, in family, or in manipulation of the white man. According to Wright, black Americans must gain personal sovereignty in order to remain in, and truly become a part of, life in the United States. For Baldwin, both black and white Americans must work to effect change in order to healthfully coexist. His black Americans live both inside and outside of their country, living there physically but not mentally. White Americans must come to understand these liminal life experiences of blacks in order to connect with their countrymen. Baldwin makes clear

that both black and white must break with the prescribed roles and traditions to discover one's true self—after this, they may move forward together into a new relationship, and a new America. As for Smith—writing a bit later in the race conflict timeline—the space for black Americans is already taking form, cast in a strong, proud, and young black image. The new generation of black activists have continued the fight in America, and it is a glorious fight. The ultimate goal is harmony between races and a peaceful life for black Americans, but it will come only after the conscious have won it. Although each author has a different vision of black life in America, it is clear that they believe black Americans belong in America—they deserve to live there, and they will battle until a space is made for them to exist as dignified human beings.

Each author presents a unique vision of blackness as it exists within the American and international contexts. This figure faces overwhelming negativity at home, a loss of identity abroad, and a constant burden of personal guilt and fear. However, he is not a passive man—he challenges the white power system, demanding a place within his own nation. Despite centuries of hopelessness and a lifetime of frustration, the black American continues to fight for his due. Wright, Baldwin, and Smith each explore a different moment of this struggle which continues to affect us in modern American life. We have not left behind the brutal struggle for equality: we must remember the sacrifices of the past, and continue to honor them in race relations today.

Appendix

Regarding the conclusions of this thesis, there are a significant amount of connections that I would like to explore further were I to continue to expand this project. Wright, Baldwin, and Smith all have works that address others aspects of American life, and that fall into different genres which could enable me to augment my conclusions. There are other black American expatriate authors, such as Chester Himes and Ollie Harrington, whose works I have not included in this study for the sake of concision. However, because these two authors worked on similar topics in the same time period as Wright, Baldwin, and Smith, there may be parallels between their works which would further support my conclusions and perhaps bring new issues to light. Beyond the contemporaries of my three authors, I would also like to broaden the time period of my analysis to include works from post-WWI expatriates through modern black American expatriate authors. This would allow me to follow the development of the racial conflicts depicted in the novels of my three authors, to explore the ideological lineage of race politics, and to further compare the manifestations of racism in France and in the United States.

Once I had broadened the scope of my analysis, I would turn my attention to modern-day issues in both countries, focusing on the differences of civil rights issues in each nation. Recent shifts in immigration and ethnic populations in France have created tensions which I would like to explore within the context of international racial struggles, as depicted by both expatriate and French authors. By examining the popular reception of immigrants and French citizenship policies, I would eventually hope to construct an image of the shifting identity, citizenship, and nationality of colonized

people of color. I would like to focus this work on the experiences of expatriated black Americans, Afro-French peoples, and French-colonized Africans.

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