

Racial Neurosis and Death Penalty: Oedipean Fate of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*

By

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Abstract

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) is one of the most widely and critically read American and African American novels in the twentieth century, and, at the same time, the most disturbing and powerful revelatory narrative which bears witness to the 'definitive' predicaments of black people in a racist American society, especially of southern ghetto. The publication of *Native Son* gives Wright one of the rare privileges and recognitions accorded to black writer in world literature; thus, the universality of black experience in the text gives rise to a vast range of readership both outside and inside America: the problematic of racial subordination explored in the narrative transcends beyond the spatio-temporal Southern American setting—that is to say, the characters, events and actions are metonymy for the oppressed people under the shackle of western colonial-imperialist apartheid. The novel portrays the "Fear", "Flight" and "Fate" of a poverty-ridden native black boy in the white-dominated city of Chicago, and how the trio shaped the mental well-being of Bigger as he navigates through racial barriers. In his attempt to overcome racial segregation and reassert his identity as a native son of American soil, Bigger unwittingly committed a grave crime of killing the daughter of a white billionaire estate-owner, Mary Dalton. It is against this backdrop that the analysis in this paper focuses on the courtroom argument between the white juries and the Communist lawyer (Boris Max) as they decide the fate of Bigger, and its implications for the mental well-being of the American society.

Keywords: mental well-being, racial neurosis and death penalty

Introduction

Wright's *Native Son* is divided into three distinctive and interrelated parts—Fear, Flight and Fate—and the three revolves on the life and experience of a young native black son, Bigger Thomas, from the wretched slum of Chicago city. The first section (Fear) portrays the manner in which race relations between white and black communities is anchored on fear which is either express in total submission (choking down rage) or in violence. Bigger Thomas's fear is conditioned by violence, not necessarily from white racial prejudice, but also from both human and non-human objects in the black community. The description of the atmospheric condition in which readers encounter the Thomases at the beginning of the narrative smacks of violence: the aggressive sound of the clock which reminds Bigger's mother of the need to wake up and resume her daily routine of labour in white world, her violent manner of waking the children from sleep and her authoritative manner of telling Bigger to pick up a job offer as a chauffeur from a white family, the Daltons.

This series of violent scenarios at home coupled with his stridency toward white world cumulate into fear, hatred, and despair; all of which accompany Bigger throughout his life, leading to errors

of judgment of unwittingly killing of a Mary Dalton. The second section (Flight) demonstrates Bigger's attempt to escape from the wrath of law after mistakenly smothering a white girl and how he murders his black girlfriend, Bessie, who Bigger thinks might reveals his secrets to the whites. Bigger is later apprehended and charged to court. The third section centers on the "Fate" of Bigger in the hand of white juries and Jewish Communist lawyer (Boris Max). While the white juries aggressively maintain that Bigger should be sentence to death for killing Mary Dalton, Max takes out time to reconcile the white juries and audience in the courtroom about the psychological impulse behind racial-related crimes. In fact, Max argues that Bigger's crime must be seen as a symptom of "insanity". On this note, the analysis of *Native Son* in this paper focuses on the courtroom argument between the white juries and the Communist lawyer, and its implications for the mental well-beings of the archetypal character, Bigger Thomas.

Psychologizing Crime, Racial Neurosis and Death Penalty

Max's apprehension of Bigger's crimes as a symptom of neurosis or "insanity" does not imply that he is insane. Rather, insanity infers to the social function of mental illness as a litmus test for Bigger's (the subject of a revolutionary praxis) underlying intention to transcend beyond stereotypical identity ascribed to the black community. It can, then, be argued that what Max tries to introduce into the murder case is a psychoanalytic therapy; a clinical procedure in which psychoanalytic theory of language intervenes within the institutional praxis of Marxist dialectical materialism; or what Jacques Lacan (1987, p.109) calls "class therapy". For the subject's revolutionary praxis "to go beyond the alienation of his labour", Lacan argues, "is as though [he] wanted to go beyond the alienation of discourse" (p.110). The ultimate object of psychoanalytic therapy, as Lacan points out, "is not man [Bigger]; it is what he lacks—not an absolute lack, but the lack of an object...[the lack] is that which excludes the possibility of naming its object" (p.113). Hence, the discourse on psychologizing death penalty is not to affirm, but to call into question and critique, the attribution of dialectical materialism as the condition for imposing death sentence. In other words, the analysis of rape murder case of "the People of the State of Illinois vs. Bigger Thomas" is anchored on deconstructing the logics of death penalty (that is a certain kind of onto-theological, metaphysical of sovereignty and cruelty), rather than death penalty itself; in truth, the incorporation or introduction of psychoanalysis not only open up, engage, transform the inconsistency and cruelty of death penalty but, as Jacques Derrida (2002) argues, "give[s] us to know it, think it, treat it, at least one could no longer anticipate doing so without psychoanalysis" (p.239). Thus, Derrida further affirms that: "The only discourse that can today claim the thing of psychical suffering as its own affair would indeed be what has been called, for about a century, psychoanalysis."

Psychoanalysis would perhaps not be the only possible language or even the only possible treatment regarding this cruelty that has no contrary term and no end. But 'psychoanalysis' would be the name of that which, without the theological or other alibi, would be turned toward what is most *proper* to psychical cruelty" (Derrida 2002, p.240). In fact, says Jacques Derrida (2017, p.3), such critique must proceed on three interrelated requisite questions: What is act? What is age? What is desire? It is against these three thorny questions that this study set out to unveil the complexity and perplexity of Bigger's death penalty. Therefore, the subsequent analysis would examine these contending questions on "act", "age" and "desire" as related to Bigger's ill-fated crime and death penalty. It is also worth noting that Derrida's seminal intervention on the ethics

of jurisprudence verdict on death penalty as a legal weapon of retribution or deterrence against senseless killing or brutal murder, is not to repudiate the validity and authenticity of death penalty but, rather, to deconstruct and critique the judicial logics behind the imposition of death penalty. For Derrida (2017), death penalty is an act which, in actuality, claims to sanction what is only an irreversible, a real, a concrete, irrevisable and sealed act, as opposed everything regarding possibility, virtuality, desire (conscious and unconscious), and intentionality (p.5). Or, as Derrida puts it in another context, death penalty is the vestige act of cruel punishment through which the penal authorities exercise and enforce “the sovereign power of the state over the life and death of the citizen” (2002, p.245).

To begin with, the age question implies the specificity of the right age to die, if there is one, as opposed to other unrecognized ages. In the laws of the State, for which Bigger’s death sentence is validated, the actual age to sanction death penalty is never known, but Bigger committed the rape murder, and is convicted and sentenced to death: “This Court finds your age to be twenty” (p.441), this is an appendant statement to the death verdict. Now, the Court pronounces the death penalty on Bigger based on the factual evidence of his legal or penal age; at age twenty he is old enough to face the consequences of his actions and deeds. The conviction of the condemned to death sentence tends to undermine or fail to think about other ages: that is, the mental age (intellectual and theoretical age) which is responsible for knowledge, acquisition, learning and understanding; and the social age (social maturity or social rehabilitation) which directs his ability to conduct himself in accordance to the approved social ethics of operating, socializing, acting and integrating with members of the society without any form of coercive measures (Derrida 2017, p.10-11). For Max Boris, the defense Communist lawyer, the penal or humanity age cannot be used to condemn Bigger to death sentence because his psychological (mental age) and physiological (social age) abilities are in sharp contrast to the legal age. Moreover, the “laws of [Illinois] allow the offering of evidence in mitigation of punishment” (p.400); Max pleads and calls on the Court’s attention to Bigger’s “plea of guilty as evidence mitigating his punishment” (p.400), and goes further to claim that “his crime was accidental, the emotions that broke loose were *already* there; the thing to remember is that this boy’s way of life was a way of guilt; that his crime existed long before the murder of Mary Dalton; that the accidental nature of his crime which he lived, a rent which allowed his feelings resentment and estrangement to leap forth and find objective and concrete form” (p.420).

The unequal abilities in age are what prompt Max to submit that Bigger is mentally retarded, but not “legally insane” (p.400). The unequal fashion in age helps to recall “not only the unfathomable difficulty of defining one or especially several ages, not only the weakness—not to say the essential idiocy of the language of the experts on this subject, the *cerveau- lent* of the experts, on the subject of this alleged maturity or immaturity of the subject who is being judged—but also the link between the question of maturity in general and the responsibility of the legal subject in general, the one, for example, to which the most rigorous discourses in favor of the inscription of the death penalty within the law refer” (Derrida 2017, p.11). To think of death penalty in relation to “desire” is not to assemble all the theoretical questions and answers revolving around the concept of desire so as to apply it “to the question of crime, murder, and the death penalty, as if we knew what it was or what it signified. On the contrary, one would have to try, if this were possible, to isolate the sphere and the time of desire on the basis of a certain way of thinking the death penalty, violent death, crime, penalty [*peine*], punishment, guilt and non- natural death” (Derrida 2017, p.6).

The scene of murder in Mary's room where blind Mrs Dalton walks into her daughter's room, is not only a crucial point leading to reversal of Bigger's experience as a poor native black boy, but also a kind of narrative in which both murder (and rapacious) crime and punishment are revealed as naturally and culturally the same. He has committed capital crime of alleged "rape" because he was alone in a room with a white girl, and in an attempt to cover up for his presence in Mary's room he unknowingly suffocates her with a pillow, out of fear of being accuse of "rape", not because he has the intention to kill her but to prevent Mary "from mumbling" his name to the hearing of her mother. However, it could be said that Bigger recognizes that he has committed an abhorrent and horrible crime only when he discovers that he could "not feel [Mary] surging and heaving against him. Her body was still" (p.177). On the other scale, Bigger accepts his guilt as a psychological reaction of getting rid of racial fear and shame that has become natural and part of his daily experience and existence, especially when coming in close contact with white people; the witness narrator notes:

It was not Mary he was reacting to when he felt that fear and shame. Mary had served to set off his emotions, emotions conditioned by many Marys. And now that he had killed Mary he felt a lessening of tension in his muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried. (p.144)

The fate of Bigger Thomas points to an end which is decidedly decreed by a verdict; that is, a fate pronounced by judicial decree in accordance to "Number 666-983, indictment for murder" in which "the sentence of the Court is that you, Bigger Thomas, shall die on or before midnight of Friday, March, in a manner prescribed by the laws of this State" (p.441). This is a prescription of legal decree of capital punishment on a vulnerable defendant who is allegedly accused to have "committed rape and murder again, *twice* in twenty-four hours" (p.438). Note, the laws of the State never states the manner of putting an offender to a legal death, but the death penalty must be executed using, as Jacques Derrida (2014) puts it, "one of those very numerous apparatuses for legally putting to death that men have ingeniously invented, throughout the history of humanity as history of techniques, techniques for policing and making war, military techniques but also medical, surgical, anesthesial techniques for administering so-called capital punishment" (p.2). And the capital punishment of putting one to death by the other may come in the form of "the guillotine, the electric chair, lethal injection, hanging, the gas chamber" (Derrida 2017, pp.5-6). In the case of Bigger, he has to face the electric chair; a mechanized technique of putting to death through electrocution.

The Court, the State's Attorney, the Governor, the Mayor, the Loop bankers, the Manufacturers' Association, the merchants of the city (the men of wealth and property) and the mobs are the founders and gatekeepers of the law of Illinois, the perpetuators, and these perpetrators of death penalty exercise absolute power when they bear witness or testimony as a way of providing evidence and proof against the defendant, even though such evidence, as in the case of the State's Attorney's indecent exhibition of Bessie's corpse in the courtroom, is merely to incite mob violence, to make Bigger "appear a monster" in the eyes of white faces inside and outside the courtroom and "to cast him in a light that it would sanction any action taken to destroy him" (p.360). But, in the real sense, Bessie's death means little to the well-being of the white community since she is black. The abrupt decision of the State's Attorney to rush trial and calls for the death penalty, and the judge's turning down of Bigger's plea to grant judicial clemency demonstrate that death penalty is the supreme decision of the white supremacists to remain in power so as to "keep what they've got", to "rule and regulate life" of black race "because they say that black people

[and *all* people who work] are inferior” and “not quite human” (p.452). In other words, Buckley’s demand for death penalty as a final verdict for Bigger’s crime is not to curb murder crime, but rather to stimulate racial hatred in the mind of white people toward blacks and to ensure that all the comprador bourgeoisie remain relevant in the helm of the States’ affairs; for the only means of relevancy lies in protecting or keeping “what they own, even if it makes others suffer. In order to keep it, they push men down in the mud and tell them that they are beasts” (p.451).

The moment of death has always been at the conscious state of Bigger’s mind right from the moment he wants to transcend beyond the color-line of racial apartheid: “He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough” (p.40). Thus, Bigger anticipated his given moment of death, a moment which is locked up in an incalculable or unforeseen future when “something awful’s going to happen to [him]” (p.50). The given moment of death becomes calculable at the very moment Bigger kills a white girl and death penalty is decreed on him. However, the time frame for the execution of death penalty is uncertain: “...you, Bigger Thomas, shall die *on or before* midnight of Friday, March” (italics mine). Hence, death comes to Bigger through the judicial verdict of the State law, and death penalty turns out to be the act of legal punishment that allows the given moment of death to be a moment to learn how to die and to make death both desirable and public; the given moment of death become desirable when Bigger comes to realize that “a knowledge of how to live was a knowledge of how to die” (p.449). Every moment Bigger tries to find meaning or a way to live by defying the racial law, by doing something outside the designated racial culture, by breaking the brass of apartheid wall, then he move stealthily toward his end.

In fact, the murder of Mary marks a significant moment of self-fulfillment because he has been able to do what nobody would ever think a black boy can do. It is imperative to emphasize that the murder of the two girls, Mary and Bessie, is not only to be understood as an attempt to break racial silence or to find fulfillment outside the confines of apartheid law but also to be misconceived as “rape” of white law:

Had he raped her? Yes, he 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 a 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 white face. He was long, taut piece of rubber which 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. (p.258)

Prior to the commencement of the narrative, Bigger has stolen some money and was locked up in a house of correction or reformatory (*sophronistery*); that is, a disciplinary centre where he is to be rehabilitated and inculcated with wisdom (*sophrosune*) on sense of moderation, temperance, self-control, psychological adjustment (see Derrida 2017, p.7). The revelation of Bigger’s experience at the reformatory offers an insight into the fact that Bigger’s life from childhood is one of crime. And the ultimate task of the reform centre is to keep a close watch (to put under surveillance) so as to rehabilitate his attitude in accordance with the white law of racial apartheid.

On the other scale, the disciplinary institution has failed to look into his health of mind or heart or to examine the causes of his crime and their total effects on his psyche; rather than to cure, the correctional institution makes Bigger to be wise about fear, hatred and rage towards white people: a subconscious wise-up which later contributes to his furious attitude towards everyone around

him. Now, Bigger has committed capital crimes of killing a white girl, Mary Dalton, and has been allegedly accused of raping her: the capital punishment for such crimes is to pronounce a judicial verdict of death penalty. But the condemned one cannot walk up to death or embrace the electric chair with an unclean soul, he needs someone to admonish him on how to save his soul through total acceptance of the religious martyr who was nailed on the “cross”, Jesus. In Bigger’s case, his mother’s church pastor, Rev Hammond, saddles himself with the responsibility of admonishing Bigger to save his soul before the arrival of death. Thus, Rev. Hammond’s visit to Bigger’s cell is not out of piety but, rather, to play his assigned role, by statute, as a member of a nocturnal council whose “soteriological mission” is to admonish and save a condemned black criminal for the salvation of his soul. However, all attempts by Rev Hammon to rehabilitate and save Bigger’s soul prove futile because he “ain’t got no soul” (p.368). Since Bigger refuses to repent, rehabilitate, amend, and accept the errors of his way, the State court implicitly considers his guilt as a treason to the rule of law—Bigger as a public enemy—and, in this manner, should not be given another chance to dwell among the virtuous and pious citizens.

Bigger is labeled as enemy of the State (the press, the church, the prosecution and, the mob leaders and their pet vassals) not because he has killed a white girl but because, as Max brilliantly and cautiously puts it, “His very existence is a crime against the state” (p.426). In short, Bigger’s defiance against the theologico-political practices of the sophronistery and nocturnal council is unpardonable, unforgivable and inexplicable before the law; the expiation is to pronounce a legal verdict of death penalty on him. It is important to note that the legal code for death sentence does not render the rights of the condemned one invalid; far from it, the logic of such code emphasizes that, as Derrida (2014) would have it:

the death penalty is an access to the dignity of human reason, and to the dignity of a man who, unlike beasts, is a subject of the law who raises himself above natural life...the death penalty marks the access to what is proper to man and to the dignity of reason or of human *logos* and *nomos* (p.8).

In addition, the law of Illinois justifies the right of the condemned one or defendant to call for plea of guilt; a legal proceeding for the Court to obtain “evidence as to the aggravation and mitigation of the offence.

The object of this law is to caution the Court to seek, to find out why a man killed and to allow that why to be the measure of the mitigation of the punishment” (p.406). The mitigation of punishment for murder case, following the hearing of witnesses and presentation of evidence, “is as follows: the Court may impose the death penalty, imprison that defendant for life, or for a term of not less than fourteen years” (p.406). Despite Max’s attempt to “go deeper into...the almost instinctive nature of [Bigger’s] crime and to establish a convincing evidence to the Court that “the mental and emotional life [and attitude] of the boy is important in deciding his punishment” (p.406), that is, to investigate the extent to which the sociological background of the youth of Bigger contribute to “the degree of responsibility he had in these crimes” (p.400), the State’s Attorney, in his bestial racist thinking, fails to discursively tell the Court why or the impulsive motives for Bigger to commit such murderous crimes; this is because, as Max points out, the State’s Attorney “could not” decipher it (p.406). Instead, the State’s Attorney flagrantly reacts by calling Max a “godless Communist” whose argument for Bigger’s case is nothing but “the silly, alien, communistic, and dangerous ideas”, and the only way to subvert such dissenting ideas is to move motion for “the imposition of the death penalty upon this miserable human fiend, Bigger Thomas” (p.432). For Max, it is not enough to base witness and evidence of Bigger’s crimes

majorly on socio-political injustice, there is a need to delve deeper into his health of mind (“mental and emotional attitude”). In a word, Max’s presentation of argument for Bigger’s case before the jury is one of staging a “psycho-drama” with a thematic focus on the protagonist’s mental and emotional life.

The therapeutic procedure enables Max to open up a hypothesis on the discourse of psychical suffering which can no longer be reduced, excluded and abandoned to theological, to metaphysical, to genetic, to physicalist, to cognitivist and other discourse of knowledge. This psychoanalytic discipline is another name for what Derrida (2002) confidentially calls “The confession of a ‘without alibi’”, that is, the possibility of cruelty “without which one can no longer seriously envision something like psychical cruelty, thus a psychical specificity, and something like the mere self-relation of this cruelty, before any knowledge, before any theory and any practice, even before any therapeutic” (p.240). But the State’s Attorney, Buckley, on the other hand, misconstrues the staging of Bigger’s plea of a guilt as “a defense of insanity”, and goes ahead to “submit witness and evidence to establish the legal sanity of the defendant” (p.400). What Buckley fails to put into consideration in his so-called validation of Bigger’s “legal sanity” is that most of his witnesses and evidence are merely based on simplistic conversations and encounters with the defendant who is said to act like “a black clown” (p.236); this misprision of personality stands in sharp opposition to the lengthy therapeutic “free-talk” of question and answer between Max and Bigger:

Max had tricked him! But no. Max had not compelled him to talk; he had talked of his own accord, prodded by excitement, by a curiosity about his own feelings. Max had only sat and listened, had only asked questions.

...

Why had Max asked him all these questions? He knew that Max was seeking facts to tell the judge; but in Max’s asking of those questions he had felt a recognition of his life, of his feelings, of his person that he had never encountered before. (p.389)

In addition, the benefits of Max’s free-talk with Bigger are as follows: first, it creates “confidence” and the right not “to forget that he was to die, that he was a black, a murderer”; secondly, “[f]or the first time in his life he had gained a pinnacle of feeling upon which he could stand and see vague relations that he had never dreamed of”; thirdly, there is a “new sense of the value of himself..a sense fleeting and obscure” (p.390). The underlying difference here is that Buckley tends to be emotional while Max, on the other hand, constructs his argument within the ideological premise of “psychoanalytic therapy”: that is, the staging of a mental state or activity that points to some hidden knowledge of Bigger’s thoughts, anxiety and beliefs which remains unknown or unknowable to him, but later manifests itself in an unguarded moments of “free-talk” or association with Boris Max, a Jewish Communist lawyer.

On the one hand, there has been an irresistible premonition in Bigger that he would do something which will bring destruction upon him; a kind of strange feeling which act as a dark force (death drive) propelling him to commit crime (not necessarily to murder) even when he never intends to do it—an impulsive drive forcing him to embark upon gruesome crimes in spite of himself. On the other side, Buckley rigidly argues that Bigger has no hidden thought (a symptom of “insanity”) because every evidence rightly points to the fact that his conscious activity is one and the same as his mind. It is not unfair to argue that the racial thinking of Buckley together with other white racists blurs his sight from seeing the dark side, the unbridled and ineluctable aspects of Bigger’s life. Max ability “to see the man in [Bigger] beneath those wild and cruel acts of his, acts of fear and hate and murder and flight and despair” is the condition that enables him to resist and

overcome racial hate toward others. In the same manner, to cure Bigger of racial fear and rage, there must be a confrontation with the enemy within and without: “On how many fronts could a man fight at once? Could he fight a battle within as well as without? Yet [Bigger] felt that he could not fight the battle for his life without first winning the one raging within him” (p.394). Max was able to unveil the tension in the split personality of Bigger Thomas; that is, Max assumes the role of a reader-critic of Bigger’s unconscious mental activity through a therapeutic procedure of free-talk or association.

The talk-cure is a clinical procedure in which Max interacts with Bigger through free association with the intention of obtaining some information about the physiological and psychological life of his client: the procedure takes the form of Bigger “telling” a story of “why he had killed...but the telling of it would have involved explanation of his entire life” (p.338) through the fragmented preamble of childhood memories. The fragmented story is a narrative, and Bigger is the narrator while Max is the reader-critic of this narrative, in that he is obliged to make meaning of or translate what is said (see: Francoise Meltzer 1990, p.156; Derrida 1993, p.9); that is, an act of interpretation that renders life incalculable and incomplete. In addition, Max must be wary to comprehend the “subplot” (the unconscious activity) in the story Bigger tells: Max was first a reader of Bigger’s narrative, then turn to a critic by reconstructing the fragmented narrative into a cogent, linear and coherent narrative. It is the reconstructed analysis that Max presents as a “case study” (the narrative of a narrative) as he makes case before the audience in and outside the courtroom that Bigger “did not kill, instead the whole act of murder surely points to “a tiny aspect of what he had been doing all his life long! He was *living*, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live, The action that resulted in the death of those two women were as instinctive and inevitable as breathing or blinking one’s eyes. It was an act of *creation*!” (p.425). Bigger’s physiological and psychological reaction is term as “an act of *creation*” partly because the murder of Mary Dalton is an attempt to, as Max puts it, “to keep from being discovered in a position which he knew we claimed warrants the death penalty”; but that fear of being discovered is the displacement (and disguise) for more subversive actions: “a sense of deep, choking hate that had been his life, a hate that he had not wanted to have, but could not help having” (p.338). Max goes further to argue that the murder crime is “only one side of” the ineluctable dark force of fear and hate that has been woven into the very structure of his being and consciousness, and “have become the justification of his existence” (p.426). So, the unconscious protest (that murder is the necessary way to live and be alive in white world) manifests itself in unguarded moment when Bigger kills a white girl, Mary Dalton. Max maintains that Bigger’s fear and anxiety to conceal his presence in Mary’s room is a psychological reaction which “was impelled murder as much through the thirst for excitement, exultation, and elation as he was through fear! It was his way of *living*! (p.426). For Bigger:

‘They wouldn’t let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain’t fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn’t want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am...’

...

‘What I killed for must’ve been good!...It must have been good! When a man kills, it’s for something...I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ‘em...’ (p.453)

From the above excerpt, it could be deduced that Bigger’s personality is split between his accessible mind (consciousness) and the inaccessible force (the unconscious or *thanatos*). The unconscious remains as something that is alien and inaccessible; in other words, the unconscious

is the otherness of Bigger's desire. Desire, in Max's words, is the "subversive reactions", "a plot or a conspiracy" and "a plan for insurrection" (p.426). What is more, the unconscious manifests in Bigger by an instinctual feeling "that there was something missing, some road which, if he had once found it, would have led him to a sure and quiet knowledge" (p.272); a kind of lack that he is strained to erase by committing "murder twice and...created a new world for himself" (p.272). This, in other words, means that the unconscious is an irrepressible desire to break the hegemonic and vindictive power of the racial law which has relegated and silenced him within the realm of fear and hate: the act of murder is "that motive, that driving desire to escape the law" (p.267) at all costs. This is why one could interpret the unconscious event as "the details of a tortured dream, happening without cause" (p.229).

In Max's firm view that Bigger's crimes are condition of psychological reaction, he goes further to argue that Bigger's mental state can best be diagnosed in the dialectical relation between the colonizer and the colonized; that is, the master-slave relation between whites and blacks. Central to the master-slave relation is a socioeconomic and political background "which has acted powerfully and importantly upon [Bigger] conduct" (p.417). For Max, the history of American nation building started on a note of confrontations between different warring forces of signification: whites and blacks (race/racism), workers and employers (class elitism) and, men and women (sexism). Within these binaries, there is a constant struggle for recognition as the master, center, and a desire to subdue the natural environment "or be subdued by it" (p.417). In this context, the whites are the center, master and recognized signifier, while blacks are the marginal, slave and unrecognized "Others" whose assigned role is to help the white masters to conquer and develop the "wild land" into "streets and factories and buildings". However, it is important to note that the white colonists are not the aboriginal of America, rather they are migrants "from the cities of the old world where the means of sustain life were hard to get or own" who settled as "colonists" in America ("a harsh and wild country") "with a stifled dream in their hearts from land where their personality had been denied" (p.417). The history of blacks in America, on the other hand, is one of slavery, dispossession and dislocation of individuals from their hometowns (Africa) who were forcibly transported through the Transatlantic Middle Passage to work as slaves "for two and one-half centuries". These enslaved lives, Max argues, "are not simply twelve million people; in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive *within* this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights" (p.423). So, in the struggle to conquer nature, the white imperial colonist "*used* others, used their lives. Like a miner using a pick or a carpenter using a saw, they bent the will of others to their own. Lives of them were tools and weapons to be wielded against a hostile land and climate" (pp.417-18). Max is not just painting the gruesome injustice, but oppressive nature, of imperial voyage into the "heart of darkness" or "dark continent", a period in human history when European colonial-imperialist "feel they are being driven by God, [or] feel they are fulfilling the will of God" but overwhelmed "by the will to rule" and to "shut their eyes to the humanity of other men, men whose lives" have been held in captivity "for two and one half centuries". Max, in the same vein, argues that: "Injustice which last for three long centuries and which exists among millions of people over thousands of square miles of territory, is injustice no longer; it is an accomplished fact of life...What is happening here today is not injustice, but oppression, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life" (p.419).

Thus Bigger is not a victim of injustice, so to speak, rather an archetypal figure for blacks who are struggling to escape the oppression of the dominant mainstream: "Unless we grasp this problem in the light of this new reality, we cannot do more than salve our feelings of guilt and rage with

more murder when a man, living under such condition, commits an act which we call a crime” (p.419). What oppression does is to choke down and repress rage among the oppressed to the state of oblivion, only to rush back like a ghostly specter “when the delicate and unconscious machinery of race relations slips”: in other words, the return of the repressed is not only terrifying but ghastly. Hence, injustice can be said to be the consciousness and oppression is the unconscious; the latter is quite responsible for Bigger’s instinctual feeling of hatred and rage towards Mary Dalton. The emotion to kill are dark forces which “were already there”, “existed long before the murder of Mary Dalton”, and “the accidental nature of his crime took the guise of a sudden and violent rent in the veil behind which he lived, a rent which allowed his feelings of resentment and estrangement to leap forth and find objective and concrete form” (p.420). Thus, the consciousness helps Bigger to repress and choke down rage, hate and fear, but the topological workings of the unconsciousness spills out so as to break the “rigid limit” of consciousness. The unconscious becomes the otherness of Bigger which has been supplanted, but only to resurface as material condition for the consciousness to manifest:

He murdered Mary Dalton accidentally without thinking, without plan, without conscious motive. But, after he murdered, he accepted the crime. And that’s the important thing. It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exiting, and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his action carried weight. (p.422)

To pronounce death sentence on Bigger, Max avers, is not the end of murder crimes among the oppressed; the impulsion to commit crimes is not something that can be killed or eliminated but, rather, subordinated; and when the repressed element returns there will be “an unveiling of the unconscious ritual of death” (p.412); that is, “there will be murder again” (p.419). As Derrida (1995) puts it: “Repression doesn’t destroy, it displaces something [that which was denied, buried] from one place to another within the system. It is also a topological operation” (parentheses mine, p.8). To put it differently, the judicial verdict of death penalty would end the murder case of Bigger Thomas, not the impulsive desire to commit crime. Max figuratively likens instinctual feelings to a “corpse”, a specter of a haunting ghost, which is “buried” in “a little [marked off] plot of ground” on a pretext of “tell[ing] our souls in the deep of the black night that it is dead and that [there is] no reason for fear or uneasiness” (p.420). In the real sense of the workings of repression, Max further argues, the buried

corpse is not dead! It still lives! 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 colloused! 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 toward 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! (p.420)

The basic topological element in the excerpt is the deployment of a *prosopopoeia* (personification), that is, the personification of the unconscious as a living entity capable of performing human actions. By implication, the personified corpse points to the return of specter whose apparition would continue to be an absent-present ghost in the souls of whites and blacks, men and women, workers and employers.

What is more, the advent of science and technology, an economy exchange of manual labour with mechanization, “made the further direct enslavement of men economically impossible, and so slavery ended” (p.418). What is worth noting is that the conversion from manual to machine is not to destroy master-slave relations or to end racial segregation between white and black

communities; instead, it still retain, incorporate the structurality of what it seems to have displaced or abolished. In modern age, feudal system has been replaced with capitalism, masters with comprador bourgeoisie, slaves with manumitted servants, plantations with factories. Derrida (1995) describes the logic of economic rupture as that which “resembles the *economy of a sacrifice* that keeps what it gives up. Sometimes it reminds one of the economy of sublation [*releve*] or *Aufhebung*, and at other times, less contradictory than it seems, of a logic of repression that still retains what is denied, surpassed, buried” (original italics, p.8). For instance, Mr Dalton, who owns and controls the Dalton Real Estate Company (a company that owns the stock of the South Side Real Estate Company), conceives his decision and business policy, of charging the Thomas family and other Negro families more exorbitant rent of eight dollars per week for the same kind of house than he charge white, as following “an old custom” (p.357) of master-slave racial segregation which keeps blacks in the limited space on the South Side, and allow whites to live in other sections of the city. In fact, for Mr Dalton, charging the Negroes a less house rent is not only “unethical” but it would amount to “underselling [his] competitors” and, at the same time, defying “a code of ethics in business” (p.357). The hypocrisy of Mr Dalton’s philanthropic gesture of contributing millions to Negro education lies in the fact that, as Max brilliantly puts it, “the profits [he] take[s] from the Thomas family in rents, [he] give[s] back to them to ease the pain of their gouged lives and to salve the ache of [his] conscience” (p.357). Mr Dalton is one of “the men of wealth and property, victims of attacks who are eager to protect their profits” and conceal their guilty conscience of oppression and exploitation of millions of vulnerable people whose hard labours help to produce goods, feed and sustain the white imperial-capitalists.

Conclusion

All in all, it could be argued that *Native Son* fails, despite Max’s rhetoric of persuasion in the courtroom to mitigate the punishment for Bigger’s crime, to successfully accomplish or vindicate the presupposed reigning philosophical assumptions of the communist-Marxism as an ideological weapon to combat racism in America. Thus, the white-dominated law can only use death penalty as an institutionalized weapon against Bigger (a metaphoric figure for black communities) who commits murder and other gruesome crimes, but there is one thing the law or legislative measure cannot claim to rule out or prohibit; and this has to do with the impossibility of the law to prohibit the desire for murder or to kill: “the law has forbidden itself or has been unable to integrate into its essential axiomatic a logic of the unconscious or the symptom” (Derrida 2014, p.9). Desire, in this context, could be understood, as Derrida aptly puts it, as “the mere desire, so to speak, before or without *acting* upon it, or at least before or without the carrying out of an act that would be identifiable according to certain problematic criteria, for there are ways of acting upon the desire to kill — that do indeed kill — without there being a crime identifiable according to the conventionally accepted signs of an act in human society such as it has conceived of itself until now” (Derrida 2017, p.7). To add, the state-sanctioned law may want to abolish or prohibit murder, mob violence, fear, hatred and rage towards oneself or the other, but such legal action cannot destroy the compulsion (conscious or unconscious desire) that presides or drives such illegal acts. The desire to kill or to murder resembles the economy of “a psychic cruelty” which “always take[s] its place by inventing new resources” (Derrida 2002, p.239). The economy implies the logic of the unconscious that keeps, retains, incorporates within itself, in double conversion, that which it represses, superseded or suspends.

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