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### **MASTERING THE MASTER'S TONGUE: BIGGER AS OPPRESSOR IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON**

RACIST IDEOLOGY CLAIMS THAT INDIVIDUAL "BEHAVIOR is determined by stable inherited characters deriving from separate racial stocks and usually considered to stand to one another in relations of superiority and inferiority." [1] It is based on the racial precept referring to "an irrational group prejudice that assumes racial others to be inferior purely in terms of their racial membership biologically conceived." [2] Race stands out as the basic element of the discourse of difference that pervades interracial relations. The "images of 'others' depend not upon ethnic differences but upon particular types of hierarchical relationships." Image-formation of the Other is determined by the power of the labelling group in relation to the labelled group. The labelling mentality defines the Other as the enemy, who is thus dehumanized by stereotyping. White stereotyping of blacks demonstrates the power of preconception over perception, leaving the white oppressor with no ability to "see," and the oppressed black with no chance to be "seen." Having limited power to control his/her own image, the black is turned into a victim of white stereotyping unless s/he controls his/her own image and defines a meaningful relationship to the white definitional framework.

In this context, Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) addresses the dire consequences of the whites' image-formation of blacks, as Wright analyzes the role of perception in interracial relations determined by the blinding function of the prevalent image-domination. Stereotypical images of blacks as beast and savage, heathen, victim, devil, servant and entertainer, and the "merry nigger," which have all been part of colonialist discourse, also exist in the white stereotyping of Bigger Thomas. The opening scene, Bigger's

violent act of killing the rat, juxtaposes Bigger's anger with the rat's fear. In the final scenes of the novel when he is trapped by the police--the legitimized release of white anger on him--Bigger will become the rat whose final cry of defiance is to no avail. But unlike the rat at the beginning, Bigger is able to attack both physically and mentally at the end.

Born in Mississippi, the twenty-year-old Bigger lives with his widowed mother, his sister Vera and his brother Buddy in one of the squalid apartments on Chicago's South Side. Bigger's violence directed to the rat is in fact the projection of his anger and hatred toward his own social role and family, for the rat, as Michel Fabre suggests, "symbolizes the family's poverty as well as Bigger's fierce hatred and the enormous forces that confront him. Eventually, too, Bigger himself will be caught like a rat."<sup>4</sup> Bigger hates his own family, not because he is inhuman but because "he was powerless to help them"<sup>[5]</sup> in the face of suffering. He feels that his mother's forcing him into taking on the responsibility of the family "had tricked him into a cheap surrender" (p. 15). Just like the rat he is cornered in a position where he does not have any freedom to go beyond the limited scope of action. His frustration in his "cornered" orbit of life prevents him from moving beyond the color-line, and knowing that he has to take the job with the Daltons fills him with despair: "It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action" (p. 16). His sense of powerlessness takes on a different form when he hangs around the gang, for he has absolutely no sense of direction. When Gus and Bigger watch the planes, they know that white boys "get a chance to do everything" (p. 19). Realizing that white skin and money are the two prerequisites for fulfilling of their dreams, Bigger and Gus "play white," recreating the roles of the white power structure "typical of the American capitalist system: warfare, high finance, and political racism."<sup>[6]</sup> The recreation of the white power structure reinforces for Bigger, rather than releases, the gap between dream and reality: "We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail" (p. 23). Being pinned down to a role in life with no outlets, Bigger finds in the movies those moments when "he could dream without effort" (p. 17).

Bigger is made to be highly conscious of his marginal social status, as he is pushed into the sign system of his peripheral position. The Black Code, which has already defined his social status, has also controlled his sexuality. When Mary gets drunk and Bigger has to carry her to her bed, he has the freedom to touch the body of a white woman. But he quickly remembers the myth of the black rapist of white women when Mrs. Dalton walks into Mary's room. Her physical blindness does not reduce his hysterical fear: "A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body. It was Mrs. Dalton" (p. 84). He frantically presses the pillow to Mary's lips not to be caught, but after Mrs. Dalton walks out of the room, Bigger discovers that Mary is dead: "Her bosom, her bosom, her--her bosom was not moving!" (p. 86) Bigger becomes a murderer in order not to enact the white myth of the black rapist while he stands out as the very victim of the white myth itself, the myth that triumphs over black reality. He has been the victim of his own fear of the white world, as much as of his self-consciousness as a black which Mary and Jan have overly sensitized him to. The situation has worked against Bigger at the very moment when he tries to escape the stereotypical image of the black male as a sexual threat to white women.

Although it is an accident, Mary's murder has given Bigger a chance to reverse the power relationship between Mary and himself: for the first time he has been able to destroy the dominant image of the whites. No longer will Mary be able to manipulate his powerless image. By burning her corpse in the furnace to hide his crime, he can triumph over the white myth of black as totally powerless to act without white manipulation. Bigger finds power in white blindness to the individuality of a black person, in the whites' stereotypical images of blacks. That Bigger has done something that the whites do not know about provides him with a sense of superiority over them, regardless of the fact that the whites see him as inferior. He has now reversed the master-slave relationship between the Daltons and himself, for he has victimized the oppressor and has controlled the situation of which they are ignorant.

His counter-stereotyping of whites is his defiance of white power in image-formation. In his intentional counter-blindness to Mary through the process of stereotyping, he has made himself into an image-destroyer. He has long wanted to blot out all the images of whites as objects of fear in his life in order to erase fear from both his mind and life: "To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force" (p. 109). He has found considerable freedom in attacking the very image that functions as the mere justification of his exclusion from the white definitional framework. He has turned the image of Mary into the image of a victim who has lost control of the situation and therefore he "felt that he had his destiny in his grasp" (p. 141). He has also killed the referential meanings of Mary, Jan, Mr. and Mrs. Dalton that create shame, fear and hate in him. His sense of powerlessness in the face of the taboos against his social conduct/status and sexuality that wipe the spirit of life out of his body is now replaced with the power he feels from violating those taboos, however covert the act of violation may be: "The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score" (p. 155). He has been deprived of being any symbol of beauty, because his skin color has been the symbol of absence in the white society. He has now used his chance to kill the symbol that the white oppressor created in Mary: "Bigger Thomas," Houston A. Baker, Jr., points out, "struck America's most sensitive nerve; he attacked the white female, its 'symbol of beauty.'" [7] The white oppressor's image of beauty represents the very image of oppression for him. The whites' admiration for their object of purity and beauty has meant the rigid control of the black image of beauty and sexuality.

The private detective Britten's questions directed to Bigger about Mary and Jan reveal his stereotypical images of the blacks. Britten's remark "To me, a nigger's a nigger" (p. 154) reinforces Bigger's stereotyping of whites: "Britten was familiar to him; he had met a thousand Brittens in his life" (p. 154). His slander points to Jan as the potential murderer because he is a communist, and it reveals Bigger's ability to manipulate the stereotypical images of the white man. His wish to project his own fear of the white world onto whites like Jan and Britten reveals his repressed desire to shake the whites' image of him as submissive. He functions according to the white definitional framework as he writes the kidnap note. It is not only the murder or the kidnap note that "evens his score" with the whites, but also the clever manipulation--a white weapon long used against the blacks--through which he can match his wits with those of the whites. When the success of his manipulation of the stereotypical images of blacks is threatened by Bessie's fear, he has to kill her. Unlike Mary's accidental murder, Bessie's murder is an intentional one to prevent her telling on him. Since Bessie is in the same boat sharing the same lot with Bigger, he identifies himself with her, as opposed to Mary. He kills Bessie, for she represents his own self-image--his own blackness--to him. As Darwin T. Turner contends: "Bigger himself has escaped from the insecurities, the fears, the feelings of inferiority etched into the Negro psyche by centuries of repression in a white-dominated society. In Bessie, he sees a continuation of those mental chains. She is still lazily amoral, timid, compliant--in short, the Sambo personality which threatens the existence of the new Bigger. In order to live, Bigger must destroy her, the last link which reminds him of and binds him to his Negroess." [8]

On the one hand he lets the whites--the Daltons, Peggy, Britten, the Press--feel that they control him because they control his image, but on the other he controls his own life by controlling his own image outside of their frame of reference. In either case the whites and Bigger are not equals, for while he can violate the imagery of domination, by not fitting into it, he cannot change the mental set of white labelling that determines the social space he is confined to. Bigger is surrounded by the people whose stereotypical images work against his manipulation of these images: Bigger is "just like all the other colored boys" (p. 180) to Peggy; "just another black ignorant Negro" (p. 199) to the reporters; the "Negro rapist and murderer" (p. 230) to the police; "black ape" (p. 253) to the white people who yell at him. The newspapers set the rhetoric of their image-domination: "Police . . . feel that the plan of the murder and kidnapping was too elaborate to be the work of a Negro mind" (p. 229). Against these various forms of stereotyping we have Bigger's pride in achieving freedom of action and opening up a personal space for himself: the murder

of Mary produces "a possible order and meaning in his relations" (p. 255) with the whites, but the relationship creates meaning only for him, not for the whites, because they still refuse to see Bigger as an individual. Once his crime is clear and he is arrested by the police, Bigger's image is controlled by the Press. The Tribuna's images of Bigger--"like an ape"/"a jungle beast" (p. 260)--remind us of the actual imagery of the Chicago Tribune clips of Robert Nixon from which Wright borrowed. The stereotypical images of blacks--such as "just like an ape," "giant ape," "animal," "jungle Negro," connoting the racist perception of the black as "beast/savage"; "rapist," as the sexual threat to white women; "criminal," as the primitive outlaw; and "moron"[9] with no intellectual capacity-- form a colonialist design for Bigger to fit into as the carbon-copy of all blacks.

The stereotypical image of Bigger as inhuman creature is shattered by Bigger's attitudes toward Jan and later toward Max. Bigger's stereotyping of Jan as a representative of all other whites disappears with Jan's understanding of his shame and guilt. His ability to go beyond his stereotypical image, when he is treated as being as human as any white, turns into a need for communicating to the white world that fails to see him as he is. He had "killed" any religious philosophy of life, for he knew he did not exist as part of the human universe in the eyes of the whites. He rejects whatever Reverend Hammond, the black preacher, tells him, not because he is incapable of faith in God but because he was pushed outside of the Christian scheme of the universe by the Christians themselves. He has always acted hard to his family, in order to protect himself from the sense of guilt they evoke in him by accepting the role of slaves of the Daltons. The sense of shame, hate and despair has been at the root of his anger that mounted to the violence toward Mary. And his despair now is the fact that "he could never make anybody know what had driven him to it" (p. 286). His violent attitude is his response to the white definitional framework that represses his individuality. The action is what the whites concentrate on and try to indict him for, but the narrator describes the thought-process behind his action that the white world motivated: "Bigger wanted to tell how he had felt when Jan had held his hand; how Mary had made him feel when she asked him about how Negroes lived; the tremendous excitement that had hold of him during the day and night he had been in the Dalton home--but there were no words for him" (p. 287).

Pride in committing an action that violates the white racist codes goes against the stereotypical image of the "merry nigger." Bigger has overturned the plantation myth that the blacks are happy with their lot because it is what they want. Mr. Dalton reenacts the plantation myth as he tries to keep the double-standard by hiring the Negro boys to make them the "merry niggers" in his house, a replica of the plantation mansion, while renting houses to the blacks only in the Black Belt, for he likes confining them to the "slave shacks" of his oppressive mind. It is a representative act of the whites who would like to keep the black plight out of sight and out of mind so that there will never be a reason for guilt and responsibility for their own crime. Dalton's evasion of any situation that would bring him into any confrontation of his own guilt is compensated for by Max who speaks in the name of all whites who have prescribed the conditions of black life in such a way that there is nothing else for the blacks to become other than criminals: "But to Mr. Dalton, who is a real estate operator, I say now: 'You rent houses to Negroes in the Black Belt and you refuse to rent to them elsewhere. You kept Bigger Thomas in that forest. You kept the man who murdered your daughter a stranger to her and you kept your daughter a stranger to him'" (p. 362). In this context, Max gets Mr. Dalton to verbalize the Daltons' blindness not only to the black plight but also to their own selves, in believing that they improve the blacks' living standards.

When Max says the whites hate the Reds as much as the blacks, he simply fails to see through Mary's condescending attitude to Bigger, and Bigger replies: "But they hate black folks more than they hate unions" (p. 322). Max is humane but is blind to the degree to which the white proscriptions of blacks' social conduct can push Bigger into such a frenzy. Max's interpretation of Mary's treatment of Bigger in the car as "being kind" is in full contrast to Bigger's reading that white sign system in Mary as condescension: "She acted and talked in a way that made me hate her. She made me feel like a dog" (p. 324). Max fails to read

the unbearable pressure and the mental constructs of white myths, such as that of the black rapist, that can be imprinted on the black consciousness, and make the black unable to distinguish between what the white myth says about the black behavior and how the black "feels" about himself. Later, in the general explanation of the real motivation for his violent reaction to the white world, Bigger attempts to get Max to see the culturally prescribed role he has been put into by the whites: "Mr. Max, a guy gets fired of being told what he can do and can't do. You get a little job here and a little job there .... You don't know when you going to get fired, pretty soon you get so you can't hope for anything .... You ain't a man no more" (p. 326). Even if Max can't understand Bigger as an individual, he can at least explain to the white audience that white society's stereotyping of blacks is the real cause of the crime of such blacks as Bigger: "He was living; only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live. The actions 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. 366).

Max can give theoretical/impersonal explanations of Bigger's act of murder, but, much like Jan, he cannot move one step beyond seeing him as a type oppressed by the capitalistic system. Unlike Bigger, who searches for meaning, Max sees Bigger as "the Symbolic Oppressed Negro."<sup>[10]</sup> He sees the impact of the white power structure on the blacks' relationships with each other as the cause of Bigger's unhealthy relationship with the other blacks: "The attitude of America toward this boy regulated his most intimate dealings with his own kind" (p. 367). White supremacist ideology has been the main controlling force Bigger has known. He is unable to verbalize his gratitude to Max for at least having listened to and tried to defend his murder of Mary Dalton as a valid reaction to white supremacy, for Bigger "had lived outside of the lives of men. Their modes of communication, their symbols and images, had been denied him" (p. 386). But he is now able to articulate how he was made to feel by the whites who caused him to become a murderer: "But really I never wanted to hurt nobody .... They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room" (p. 388). The white American success myth, which necessitates a freedom of action and a sense of dignity in the white man is re-created by Bigger through a reversal process. Murder is the negative version of that success, but since it is an act of creation for him, it is the only success myth in the name of freedom that he can ever have: "But what I killed for, I am" (pp. 391-392).

Ironically enough Max fails to comprehend that white blindness to the black plight constitutes the problem of meaning in the sense that meaning refers "to the interpretation of messages."<sup>[11]</sup> Interpretation requires a mode of seeing, because it needs the definitional framework within which one looks at and understands the given situation in order to share the reality of experience. As Molefi Asante maintains: "Sharing of images is reasonable, valuable, and positive; image-domination, however, is the same as other colonial conquests, vile, repressive, and negative."<sup>[12]</sup> In this sense, Bigger's meaning is never shared by the whites to the extent needed to make any "communicative understanding" between them possible. Hence, stereotyping becomes for Bigger a way of "mastering the master's tongue [as] the sole path to civilization, intellectual freedom, and social equality."<sup>[13]</sup>

Bigger, who is forced to become the victim of stereotypical images at the beginning of the novel, now becomes a participant in the process of controlling images and meaning. He controls his own image and interprets the meaning of that image for his own self. He has succeeded in manipulating the whites' images of blacks and has turned to the stereotyping process as a weapon against the whites themselves. He has discovered that if he oppresses the oppressor with the same power of images, he will share the same power with the oppressor. Bigger, then, rebels against the blacks' lack of power to define themselves by operating within a white definitional framework. He exerts his power to destroy the whites by operating outside the white definitional framework. By acting out his role, defined by the white stereotypical image of a black man as a beast to be caged, yet by using his mind as untypical of the same image, he attacks the white definitional framework both physically and mentally, unlike the rat at the beginning of the novel. However, he ends up being trapped by the police for not operating within a white definitional framework.

Since the white labelling .group has already formed the image of the Other in him, as the member of the labelled group, he is punished according to the rules of the image-domination of the whites, because only the white oppressor has the right to act as the oppressor, as the master of the oppressive definitional framework, and not Bigger. He is punished with the death penalty, regardless of the fact that white stereotyping made him what he is--monster to the Press; victim to Jan and Max; heathen to the mother/minister; black worker to Mary, Peggy and the Daltons; "unhappy nigger," as opposed to the "merry nigger," to the white society, including the police and the press.

The image-domination pins him down to his prescribed role within the framework of these images. However, 'in the eyes of the reader, Bigger's acceptance of the individual responsibility for his own act of murder erases the image of Bigger as a type, as the novel itself shatters the white illusion that racist oppression produced minimal effects on the black mind. As James Baldwin remarks, if the black "breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him we are panic-stricken and we feel ourselves betrayed." [14] The sense of betrayal aroused in the white readers is carried further, for in the final scene Bigger is in full control of his image as an individual, and of the meaning that self-image holds for him. He has made a shift in his basic power relationship to the whites in murdering Mary and seeing her as a type. Unlike the stereotypical definition of the image, he has become a "merry nigger," not because he has enjoyed oppression but because he has managed to act as a "bad-nigger." Having victimized a white out of his free will, he has felt proud of it, for whites have been forced "to see the world through the eyes of a black man" who "reduce [s] the Whites to stereotypes, since Bigger always remains an outsider to their world" (Fabre, p. 185). Hence, he has challenged and threatened the whites' control of the black image in proving his intellectual capability by planning out and rationalizing the murder. He has taken on the role of the oppressor in determining and destroying the image-formation of the whites by the dynamics of his own blackness. He has treated the white image as the Other and in doing so he has redefined the logic of center and periphery in personal terms in an attempt to alleviate his marginal role in the oppressive definitional framework.

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[2] David Theo Goldberg, "The Semantics of Race," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 15 (October 1992), 544.

[3] Jan Nederveen Pieterse *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, trans. Jan N. Pieterse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 104.

[4] Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun, (1973; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 182-183.

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