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# The Making and Unmaking Of Whiteness: Richard Wright's *Rite of Passage*

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Richard Wright's *Rite of Passage* (1994) unmasks whiteness as a mark of ideology and racial privilege. Valerie Babb suggests that "a distinction should be made between white skin—the common pigmentation we associate with those we call white—and whiteness: . . . whiteness is more than an appearance; it is a system of privileges accorded to those with white skin" (Babb 9). Coded as a norm for empowerment, whiteness is often a "representation of terror" (Hooks 172) in the black mind as a consequence of the values and attitudes that persist as the legacies of white racism. Whiteness, as the privileged signifier, constantly reminds us of power and control. "Power," as Michel Foucault has shown, "means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations" (198). Establishing the relationship between margins and center is an arbitrary social formation. The social construction of whiteness determines the discourse of white supremacy because it is built on both exclusion and racial subjugation. White supremacy powerfully affects the lives of blacks, particularly in *Rite of Passage* where whiteness operates in a social context, signifying "the right to exclude others" (Harris 108).

A posthumously published "novella which Wright completed in 1945 and later tried to include in *Eight Men* shortly before his death" (Butler 315), the story centers around the main character's rite of passage as he moves from being a prospective student to being a criminal. The fifteen-year-old black male protagonist Johnny Gibbs is a hard-working student at school, but his whole life is shattered when he learns that he has been a "foster" child all along

and the city authorities demand that he should move to live with another family. As Arnold Rampersad indicates, Johnny's

life is changed by the government bureaucracy in the area of human welfare and social services. . . . The power and carelessness of the white world may be inferred from the policies and actions of the authorities who insist that Johnny must be sent to a new home, even as it is clear that these authorities have only the most limited respect for blacks and the poor in general. (120)

Much like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and Fred Daniels in "The Man Who Lived Underground," Johnny is unable to deal with the crisis of identity when his life is dramatically changed.

Robert Butler rightfully suggests that Johnny's real dilemma lies in this very crisis: "Should he accept an identity arbitrarily constructed and imposed upon him by a social world which is unable to perceive him as a human being, or should he rebel absolutely, completely rejecting the standards of conventional society, and begin the task of building a radically isolated self?" (315-16). If we explore the question within the terrain of whiteness, the question boils down to whether Johnny should conform to the tenets of white supremacy or not. Because the conventions are produced by the inherent ideology of whiteness within the sociocultural constituents of domination, he rejects them and begins building a radically isolated self and becomes a non-conformist. Johnny's choice to be an outsider in becoming a member of the gang, "The Moochers," foreshadows his identity as a criminal through the rest of his life: he turns to the gang's solidarity, built on hostility against whites, to define the social boundaries of blackness.

The novel opens with Johnny in the classroom with his mind "winging away" from the voice of his white teacher, Mrs. Alma Reid, towards home. He is full of joy that he will soon be home for dinner with his family: "The white woman teacher's silver voice caressed his ears droningly, lulling him into the depths of a day-dream centered about a bowl of steaming beef stew waiting for him upon the kitchen table" (1). Even though he is non-white, his whole identity is defined in terms of the social markers of whiteness: his report card is all A's in a school where the white teacher's authority is visible, and his success makes him feel that it is a "rosy world" (3) in which he is superior: "He caught a glimpse of a boy

flashing a knife and he smiled superiorly" (3). He values education and success, reinforced by the teacher's approval, because they are the two things that give social meaning to whiteness. The teacher's "silver voice" has a "measured rhythm" (1) that reinforces social distance between whiteness and Johnny. A black boy in Harlem, whose identity is built against whiteness, Johnny is positioned in a social sphere where the white authority figure has the power to evaluate his work as a promising boy in the future. Education bears contradictions in the sense that Carter G. Woodson indicated in 1933: "The present system under the control of the whites trains the Negro to be white and at the same time convinces him of the impropriety or the impossibility of his becoming white" (23). Johnny's identity is secured by school and home, the social institutions of the dominant white culture, but becoming "white" is impossible, for he is circumscribed by the unreachability of his white teacher, a situation he can transcend only through his daydreams of home which represent the lack of emotional identification between the teacher and himself. The first paragraph of the novel, then, shows Johnny as not being at home with the white teacher, even though he likes her, for the images of home and family enter into his mind rather than her words. He travels mentally "away" from the immediate context of the classroom rather than being a natural part of it.

His pride in his success is soon shattered when he becomes a social failure in dealing with a crisis of identity. Unlike the opening sentences that describe his sense of security at school, we see him frozen "with brutal fury" (14) as he learns that his destiny is controlled by the white authorities of the city: "Only a half hour ago his world had been so solid, real; now he lived in a hot, sick dream. The mother he loved so deeply was now disavowing him, cutting him off, telling him that all his life had been a lie" (16). He realizes that he is being trapped by the white system that legalizes the act of disowning a black boy. The regulations stifle his sense of freedom since he knows that if he refuses to live with another family or runs off, he will end up either in boys' home or in jail. He realizes he is socially invisible to the white supremacist system. Practically "homeless," with no real family, a complete non-entity for whom his mother's and sister's solid presence seems "unreal" (12), he is defeated by the harsh reality and begins to act "vio-

lently” (18) and “defiantly.” (20) Refusing to obey the white authorities for whom he is not human enough for their compassion, he runs away from home.

His first crime on the streets is stealing peanuts and candy bars out of hunger, quite determined “never to forgive, never to surrender” (28). The threatening image of the city terrifies him, making him feel out of place. Not knowing what to do and where to go, he longs to talk to Mrs. Reid, but she unfortunately presents an unreachable whiteness in his mind: “but she was white” (33). Although a friendly white man “inserted his fare and Johnny squeezed through with him and edged his way past” (34), he can trust no white man in the real sense of the term and turns to his friend Billy, a gang member, for survival. Much like Mrs. Reid, the world seems “distant but threatening” (34), and it is only through Billy that Johnny learns the truth about his origins: Billy has overheard from Johnny’s foster family that Johnny’s real mother went to Atlantic City years ago where she got pregnant after one night’s relationship with a man whose name she no longer remembers, for she became sick enough to be placed in an asylum where she still lives. In a hostile world that denies his subjectivity, Johnny is left all alone, losing the opportunity to be.

Feeling that he “was nothing, a nobody” (51), he turns to the gang, and he is “tested” by the leader Baldy in a violent fighting scene where Johnny wins over him in an unexpected way: “Johnny went wild; he rushed at Baldy, heedless of the bottle, and rammed Baldy’s head against the concrete wall. If Baldy wanted to kill him, then he would kill first. . . . Enraged, Johnny leaped upon Baldy, feeling that he had to blot out this beast once and for all” (78-79). Pushed into bestiality, Johnny becomes a potential murderer out of self-defense, showing that he will never be the same person he had been before. In a scene where he almost reminds us of Bigger Thomas’s strategy of killing Mary and later Bessie to save himself from a problematic situation, violence presents itself as the most appropriate response to crisis. Passing successfully through the ritual of initiation, Johnny replaces Baldy in leadership and he earns the nickname, the Jackal.

Baldy remembers the racist/sexist attitude of the white boy he ruthlessly stabbed to death. The white boy’s asking for a black woman in a racist remark directed to Baldy, “Shine, where can I

get some black meat?" (99), causes his death. The sexual exploitation of black women highlights the colonizing mind-set. The white male voice makes clear the social implications in appropriating stereotyping for the construction of "the privileging of whiteness" (Babb 117). Hence, the root of Baldy's violence is his rage against this very privileging, and therefore the commodification of blackness: "White men are always poking around us, trying to find a colored gal, especially those white soldier boys. They hate us, but they like our women" (99). Baldy's bloodthirsty criminality is a natural outcome of blatant racism. He lost all his hair because of the white nurses' carelessness in letting him stay too long under the x-ray machine to kill ringworms (88). "But those nurses were white and naturally they were paying more attention to the white boys than to Baldy. They forgot Baldy" (89). Since his mother shows no mercy to him either, he breaks with her and leaves home. Unlike in slavery times, we do not see the centrality of violence and rape to the growth of white identity in this novel, but instead we have the white government bureaucracy that demands that Johnny be snatched from his foster family, white doctors who are indifferent to the damage done to black skin, and white men who are after black women: in short, the system of domination as significant to the construction of whiteness.

In this context, Johnny feels that "he had crossed the frontier of childhood and had become a man" (92). Johnny's decision that "he must now be tough and hard if he is to survive in his new world—marks his emergence. . . into manhood" (Rampersad 140). Not believing in all this violence and mugging, he tragically knows his homeless self can only be located on the margins—the dark streets of the white city. On the contrary, Baldy feels quite at home on the streets because crossing the frontier of childhood has meant killing a white man when necessary. Baldy appropriates the white racist paradigm that it "is by eating the Other (in this case, death) that one asserts power and privilege" (Hooks 36). The power of his rage against the white man signifies his refusal to internalize the white imperialist gaze that defines blackness as a spectacle of disempowerment.

All the gang members mug whites and blacks alike, but they take absolute pleasure when it is the white man whom they humiliate. Treetop would "rather jump a white man" (104). Skinkie

agrees, “Yeah. Somehow it feels better” (104). Johnny soon discovers what that means when at night they hide and wait for a white man with money and attack him immediately. Sneaking out of the bushes, Johnny is “amazed to see that the white man had been pinned flat upon his back, his head crooked in Baldy’s arm. White and helpless, the white man’s face was tilted to the sky, mouth gaping, white teeth showing” (105). The scene delineates the fact that whiteness is indeed a term reflecting the shifting relationships of social power and that it is sustained through white racial hegemony. But the scene now dismantles the supremacist attitude of the victim, who represents the perfect image of a white middle-class gentleman, “tall, well-dressed, and carried a walking stick” (104), just before the mugging takes place. He is a man, confident enough to say, “For a moment, boy, I thought you were one of those muggers. Good to see a well-behaved colored boy for a change” (105). Standing on the edge of victimization, the white man’s stereotyping of blacks invokes his position, built on conventional paradigms of domination, to maintain his power. The conventional use of “boy” to the black muggers shows his perspective of white supremacy in reinscribing the oppressive racial hierarchy.

The gang does not avoid, but, on the contrary, confronts the power of whiteness: His trousers are jerked off “to prevent the man’s running to give alarm, to intimidate him with partial nakedness” (106). In its symbolic connotations, the white man is repositioned as socially naked of the privileging of whiteness. Here is whiteness as “a [social] fabrication” (Babb 167), invented to affect the lives of blacks, stripped of being the norm in and of itself. Humiliation of the white man in body and spirit results ironically in his absolute fear of the stereotype he himself has invented: “Take my money, boys, but don’t hurt me” (106). Naming blackness as the representation of terror, he fails to realize that the gang’s survival strategy is based on conceptualizing whiteness as the real threat and appropriating its powerful impact on their lives. The moment that the white man’s location has shifted, the privileging of whiteness holds no significance even to himself.

The scene reveals the urban sociocultural connotations of mugging a white man: the association between whiteness and power is ironically reconstructed as an association between whiteness and disempowerment. The terror of blackness which has forged white

identity is now replaced by the black youth's struggle to beat down the terror of the predominantly white cityscape. In Wright's fiction, we often find the description of the city as a terrifying mindscape that reflects the black male protagonist's thoughts and feelings. The ruthless city, depriving Johnny of the family that has nurtured him so long, turns into an alien space that makes him feel "a strange sense of void" (57). Similarly, Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* lives in a mental slum, reflecting the sense of entrapment he feels in the city where he is "pinned down to a role in life with no outlets" (Demirtürk 268). This sense of estrangement and loneliness is no different from what Cross Damon feels in *The Outsider*. Unlike Bigger who can reach the possibility of freedom in the city through violence, Cross seems to fail in his effort to transcend the constricting orbit of life in the city. As Yoshinobu Hakutani contends, "The controlling image of Wright's city is that of a crowded place inhabited by the people, black and white, who are alienated by displacement and industrialization" (108).

Determined not to be devoured by the gothic cityscape, the gang in *Rite of Passage* ironically utilizes the vision of city as terror. Much like the "white unity [that] could only create itself against images of nonwhite others" (Roediger 18), the gang members define themselves against the images of the white Other. Collaborating in the othering of whiteness in an attempt to decenter its location makes possible "the disassociation of whiteness with terror in the black imagination" (Hooks 177). Refusing to be symbolically castrated by the white racism directed against them, they attack the social construction of whiteness as race and class. Repositioning the white man as marginal, they dehegemonize his position by forcing him to occupy the position of the Other. For a moment at least, the gang members succeed in decolonizing their minds because it is clear that "without the capacity to inspire terror, whiteness no longer signifies the right to dominate. It truly becomes a benevolent absence" (Hooks, 177-78).

The scene is juxtaposed with a black woman's voice—"You Boys!" (107)—in Johnny's mind, an image almost like his "foster" mother, who stands for his conscience, or to use Butler's terms, for "the voice within Johnny" (319). She seems to embody the nurturing effect of his mother as he hears the voice over and over again. That he longs for home shows that he is not comfortable with over-



turning the white man's position and exerting all his power on him; this unconventional act makes him feel guilty. After they hand in their daily earnings to the black man, Gink (110), Johnny lies awake continuously hearing the black woman's voice. No matter how hard he hopes that the black woman would call him home and show affection to him, he knows very well that this will never happen. He has undergone the rite of passage from innocence to experience, and the world of innocence will never be restored. But it is actually the woman's blackness that calls him home to a sense of humanity that he is expected to forget in acting as "white" within the gang. He is unable to answer the questions of "Where was he? How had he come here?" (114), for he knows deep down that he had no other choice than ending up in a gang. Although he does not feel at home in this new world of violence, his location has been socially determined.

The novel opens with Johnny steeped in a life that promises happiness and ends with his unwilling transformation into a gang member living on the margins. His rite of passage signifies, on the surface, his journey from enjoying the value-system of whiteness with education as the key to success and a sense of security in the family, to becoming a "man" who has the freedom to humiliate a white man, an act of violence that re-positions whiteness as powerlessness in the face of black rage and rebellion. Ironically enough, it is only in the moments of mugging that the gang members become white. All the key concepts of success, job, and money are attained in an inverted way when whiteness is re-positioned as disempowerment. In other words, the gang has to survive by "mooching" the concept of whiteness as social construct. Given the fact that these boys are criminals in a system that offers no other alternative, they live out the inversion of the American success myth. Hence they are doomed to being life-long "foster children" of the dominant white culture that has trapped them within the social signifiers of blackness. The peripheral location that Johnny inhabits inevitably becomes his "real" home, for there are no other shifts in location offered by the real world out there.

*Rite of Passage* can be viewed as representative of Wright's canon because in such works as *Native Son* and *The Outsider*, we see that the black male protagonists are forced to resort to violence as a survival strategy in a white racist social environment. Bigger

Thomas rebels against the white racial hegemony by his accidental murdering of Mary Dalton. Although it is an accident, Mary's murder gives Bigger an opportunity to temporarily reverse the power relationship between whites and himself. Violence against white people becomes the only viable means to attain selfhood for Bigger: "I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" (501). His search for identity and meaning can only be realized through an inverted version of the American success myth when he chooses to become "a bad nigger" in an effort to oppress the white oppressor. Cross Damon in *The Outsider* has to kill Joe, Gil, Herndon, and Hilton when his subjectivity is threatened. His urge for freedom forces him to use physical violence against anyone, black or white, who stands in his way. Cross becomes one of the typical monsters produced by an industrial society that erases the subjectivity of people, regardless of race. As Maryemma Graham claims, unlike Bigger who destroys those setting out to destroy him, Cross kills "to permit transformation" (xxvi). All these characters rebel against and are victimized by a white racist power structure that denies them the possibility of freedom and equality, and hence the opportunity to become the creator of their own destinies.

Similarly, Johnny Gibbs has to face the reality of the white racist power structure in discovering he is a foster child and attaining his position in the gang as a substitute for his family. Johnny's rebellion has made him "a radically isolated self" (Butler 316). Rejecting control by the ideology of whiteness, he seems to act out what the vet says in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "there's always an element of crime in freedom" (153). Produced as stereotypes in the white authorities' minds, the gang members, including Johnny, help whites "guard" the white civilization, from which they are excluded. In order to survive, they indirectly reinforce the system of domination by bribing the white cops, the so-called guardians of civilization, an ironic but necessary act to guarantee their freedom. In that sense, whiteness maintains its privileges by consuming its white middle-class values in benefiting from the crime of its "victims."

The criminal acts of the gang invite us to question and reconstruct the center and the margins of whiteness. If whiteness is all about the maintenance of privilege, then the gang shares a

collective black identity which challenges the association between whiteness and privilege. Hacking away at the tyranny that had imprisoned them for years, the whiteness Mrs. Reid embodies as unreachable becomes somewhat reachable in the attacks against the white men. If racism is maintained through social institutions and mechanisms like the hospital and the welfare system, then it is easier to attack the privileges of an individual white skin to get back at “social, political and economic value in [that] white skin” (Ignatiev 20).

The continual attacks on whiteness are acts of rebellion against the white status quo considered as a natural phenomenon. The emotional subtext of attacking whites is built upon rage against social exclusion: if the white public sees “crime with a young black male face” (Hutchinson 419), then white America deserves to be victimized by its own distorted reality. The gang tries to throw off the yoke of white racist oppression and control their own destinies, an act socially unacceptable to the whites.

In contrast to the history of white racism, where blackness is denigrated and whiteness is valorized, the white imperialist gaze and black stereotypes shift locations in *Rite of Passage* as the gang transgresses the racial boundaries sanctioned by the laws. In this context, Johnny Gibbs, who was taught to be “white” at school and by his family, breaks with whiteness in running off, but becomes “white” only within the gang, “knowing that he was alone and had to go on alone to make a life for himself by trying to reassemble the shattered fragments of his lonely heart” (115). The imperialist gaze now adopted by the gang against the whites re-positions Johnny, as the leader of the gang, with “sovereign freedom” (Patterson 3-4), the legally sanctioned property of whiteness in an attempt to participate in the unmaking of whiteness.

Having the right to speak from the location of whiteness entails the manipulation of narratives of black inferiority, paving the ground for black-on-white violence in order to unseat the “hegemonic narrative” (Pease 1) of whiteness. Attacked by the gang, the white man embodies the anxiety of displacement, unable to function within the domain of freedom assigned to him as the oppressor. The moment he becomes the public spectacle for the gang, we are invited to avert our critical gaze from the oppressed to the op-

pressor. What we see in the white man is the need to give up on the social dynamics of colonialism in order to survive.

As Gayatri C. Spivak suggests: "The centre is always constituted in terms of its own marginality" (40), for the simple reason that if the white man can stereotype black boys as potential criminals in associating blackness with terror in his mind, then where does the white man stand? Obviously, he is not standing at the center any longer, for he does not occupy a safe location, if it is captivated by the narratives of blackness in the past. He has to shift in positionality in order to shift paradigms so that he can see through himself as a mere social invention. It is only in their act of "unlearning white supremacist attitudes and values [that] the deconstruction of the category 'whiteness'" (Hooks 12) is possible. If the white man is frightened by transgressing the very boundaries he himself has invented, then he should learn to decolonize his own mind of the ideology of whiteness.

Along the same lines, when blackness shifts in location, it needs to shift paradigms in order to re-inhabit a location where whiteness is reconstructed as an ideology of disempowerment. The shifting relationship between whiteness and blackness, between the center and the margins, delineates blackness in the act of unmaking whiteness as a social construct in a context where the paradigms of whiteness have to be reconstructed.

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