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The Subversive Power of Signifying and the Ambivalence of Modernity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Lahoussine Hamdouné(*)

Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940) is more often than not dealt with as a distinguished instance of African-American protest literature being lacking in terms of literariness and narrative techniques. While it is true that protest literature's overemphasis on the socio-political is usually costly, at least as much as the authenticity of the characters and the literariness of a literary work are concerned, the many readings of *Native Son* looking at it almost exclusively within this frame hardly do justice to the work. A return to Henry Louis Gates's theory of Signifying posited in his seminal book *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of African-American literary Criticism* (1988) and Paul Gilroy's discussion of Richard Wright's ambivalent modernism in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) will offer an insight into a reading that goes beyond the theme of protest without dropping it altogether. Below I will examine Wright's representation and thematization of the Black vernacular speech, the African-American language games, Signification, and music. This examination is intended to uncover, firstly, the fact that despite Wright's naturalism and his being unconcerned with forging a narrative form or strategy from African-American culture, the author does, indeed, thematize quite many black rhetorical tropes in a manner that displays the subversive power of the black vernacular. Secondly, music, differently from these tropes, has no more than a dim presence in *Native Son*, which is consistent with Wright's generally ambivalent attitude towards African-American musical forms expressed explicitly in his essay writings.

To begin with, *Native Son* displays the use of the Black vernacular as a "non official discourse", or a "familiar speech", that is subversive of the White standard American discourse which embodies "the official speech", to use Mikhail Bakhtin's terms. Although the narrative includes several examples of the vernacular speech being representative of the non-official discourse, only one instance will be dealt with below, namely, Bigger and Gus's language game. Related to the vernacular language are a few instances of Signifying. The first of these is Bigger and Gus's playing Whites. This game may be considered as a form of Signifying if one views Signification as "the trope of the tropes," as Gates calls it. By the same token, Bigger's manipulation of his gestures, face expressions, and words used to trick Britten during the interrogation can be read as an instance of Signification. In fact, the tactic of exhibiting the opposite of what one thinks, feels, or really means in order to trick one's interlocutor is, according to Gates, the core of Signification. Third, Bigger's erroneous version of his story and Wright's exaggerated imitation of White newspapers are, in a sense, subtle ways of

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Signifying. Since White racist discourse composes stereotyped and fictitious stories about African-Americans, these, in turn, can as well create their erroneous versions of real events or laugh at those stereotyped representations of their race.

The Bigger-Gus exchange is one of the most spontaneous conversations in which Bigger is involved. Being so, it is an authentic bit of African-American reality. The fact that it incorporates both a clear instance of Signification and a street game akin to Dozens justifies such authenticity. First, the acrobatic sky-writing plane spelling out the bold commercial message "USE SPEED GASOLINE" signifies upon "a modern inscription of the ship on which a folk arrived from Africa"⁽¹⁾ in that the plane is a "return of the repressed content of slavery"⁽²⁾. While the ship signifies the exclusion of the Black race from modernity's claimed humanism, the plane points to the alienation of the African-Americans from the technological accumulation that White America has achieved. In other words, rather than emancipating African-Americans and compensating for their ancestors' enslavement by early modernity, the new era of modernity enlarges the bridge between White and Black Americans. Additionally, the appearance of the plane signifies what Houston A. Baker terms "the traditional dynamics of the Afro-American place"⁽³⁾; that is, due to the dreadful dichotomy between their experience and that of White Americans, African Americans are placeless, migratory, and ever attracted to transport and railways. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Bigger has repeated thrice his desire to fly (N.S, pp.54-55).

Akin to the commercial that the plane has written are the two signs that Bigger notices in the Black Belt sector of the city. The first of these says, "THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE REAL ESTATE COMPANY"⁽⁴⁾. Rather than taking this message at face value, Bigger conceives of it as signifying not only upon the "placeless place" and dispossession of his race, but also upon the very legal and economic system that defines ownership and commodification. Bigger is then involved in the process of "transmuting the lexicon of ownership into one's own experience"⁽⁵⁾:

He had heard that Mr. Dalton owed the South Side Real Estate Company, and the South Side Real Estate Company owned the house in which he lived. He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. He had never seen Mr. Dalton until he had come to work for him; his mother always took the rent to the real estate office. Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. He owned property all over the Black Belt, and

(1) John M. Reilly, "Giving Bigger a Voice: The Politics of Narrative in *Native Son*" in Keneth Kinnamon (ed.), *New Essays on Native Son* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 54.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 54.

(3) Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Richard Wright and the Dynamics of Place in Afro-American Literature" in Keneth Kinnamon. Ed, p. 86.

(4) Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper, 1940 [Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Ed. Penguin Books, 1984]), p. 212. Subsequent parenthetical references are to this edition.

(5) Houston A. Baker, "Richard Wright and the Dynamics of Place in Afro-American Literature," in Keneth Kinnamon (ed.), p. 94.

he owned property where White folks lived, too. But Bigger could not live in a building across the "line". (N.S, p. 212-213)

The narrator, whose consciousness identifies with Bigger's, adds an interesting note that reveals the subversive aspect of the protagonist's comprehending of the sign: "In a sullen way Bigger was conscious of this" (N.S, p.213).

"IF YOU BREAK THE LAW YOU CAN'T WIN" shows above the top of a poster displaying Buckley. The description of the state's attorney is double-toned:

the White face was fleshy but stern; one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passer-by. The poster showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. (N.S, p.51)

On the one hand, this description depicts Buckley as omnipresent, as tremendously powerful, as a god, that is. His power is metonymically represented by his "look" and his "index finger". While the "White gaze" is, of course, a gratuitous challenge to the African-American, the White "index finger" pointing to "each [Black] passer-by" expresses a similar "accusation" of the Black people. Astonishingly enough, Buckley will accuse Bigger of crimes that the latter never actually committed, which means for the protagonist yet another expression of "the White folks' hating of the Black folks", a translation of that straight look into material oppression. On the other hand, the description of Buckley, once related to the sign "IF YOU BREAK THE LAW, YOU WILL WIN", amounts to the fact that law makers and their race are the actual benefactors of such a law. In playing with the 'phonetically the same', Bigger expresses an awareness of the contradiction inherent in the sign (the commercial) as exemplification of the White racial discourse. In other words, the protagonist exercises an act of subversion by using the "bucks", which sounds almost like Buckley, while commenting on the poster: "I bet that sonofabitch rakes off a million bucks in graft a year" (N.S, p. 51). The protagonist's mockery becomes noticeable enough as he "laugh[s]", "shake[s] his head" and provides his last comment: "You crook [. . .] You let whoever pays *you* off win!" Since the Daltons are among the White "winners", this sign actually links to the one saying, "THIS PROPERTY IS MANAGED BY THE SOUTH SIDE ESTATE COMPANY". Yet, though the placement of the two signs in the midst of the Black belt zone is a gross sign of extreme provocation of the segregated population of the area, the power of Signification produces a subversive interpretation of the two commercials.

The other form of the Black vernacular presented in *Native Son* is the street language game. In the midst of Bigger-Gus's exchange, the narrator intervenes and 'explains' the nature of the game in which the two characters will involve: "Let's play 'white', Bigger said, *referring to a game of play- acting in which he and his friends imitated the ways and manners of White folks*" (N.S,p.56; emphasis mine). The narrator provides every now and then guiding keys so that the reader will recognize the game being played is

an adapted version of the dozens. For example, the narrator comments on the characters' tones and actions: "in a sonorous tone", "with military precision" (*N.S.*, p.56). He also describes expressions and gestures: "looked wearily", "frowning", "his eyes filled with mock adulation and respect" (*N.S.*, p.57). Moreover, he emphasizes the vernacular accent: "Yessuh" (*N.S.*, pp.56-57). Finally, he stresses irony by using italics: "I bet that' *just* the way they talk" (*N.S.*, p.57), "I'm calling a cabinet meeting this afternoon at four o'clock and you, as a Secretary of State, *must* be there" (*N.S.*, p.57).

While such characteristics display Wright's realism, they clearly point to Signifying as a "humorous ironic trope", that is, as a game embodying some of Geneva Smitherman's descriptive characteristics. These are: indication/circumlocution, metaphorical-imagistic, humorous/ironic, rhythmic fluency and sound, punning, and introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected (Gates, p.94). This game, in fact, exhibits multiple irony as it is an exaggerated representation of White Americans' arrogance and stereotype, a representation shifting from accent to gestures, to tone, to behavior. The final scene is appealing in that it is a parody, or rather a pastiche, of the White discourse's misrepresentation of African-Americans: "Well, you see, the niggers is raising sand all over the country," Bigger said [. . .] "we've got to do something with these Black folks . . ." (*N.S.* p.57). Indeed, parody has largely been used in early African-American newspapers to signify upon White discourse in the same way Bigger and Gus do.⁽⁶⁾

Moreover, in nowhere in *Native Son* are the differentiating features of the Black vernacular as language more superbly figured than in the Bigger-Gus conversation. In addition to the Signifying game that the exchange comprises, the two characters use a series of loosely related statements that play on the logically and semantically unexpected. For example, when Gus asks Bigger "[w]here do they [i.e. White folks] live?" Bigger comes up with an answer that is hardly expected: "Right here in my stomach" (*N.S.*, p.60). Immediately afterwards, the exchange turns into dispersed fragments with metaphors and a remarkable rhythmic fluency and sound:

'Every time I think of 'em, I feel 'em,' Bigger said.

'It's like a fire'

[. . .]

'It's like I was going to do something I can't help. . .'

[. . .]

'It's like you going to fall and don't know where you going to land. . .'

[. . .]

'They got everything,' Gus said.

'They won the world' (*N.S.*, p.60)

Since these utterances run on the paradigmatic "y-axis" rather than on "x-axis", they are substitutions determined by phonetic rather than by semantic similarity (it's like . . ., it's like. . .). According to Geneva Smitherman, an aspect such as this is characteristic

(6) See the examples provided in Gates, p. 90-9

of Signifying language ⁽⁷⁾. At the end of the exchange, Gus asks Bigger a question that seems out of context: “say, you got that job you told us about?” Then, he adds an interesting remark, “[y]ou talk like you don’t want it.” Gus’s gesture, in fact, implies that he understands that Bigger has been indirectly talking about his job. Therefore, this passage exhibits both formal aspects of the signifying language, aspects that blur the meaning and a signified that does not easily land itself to grasping. If Gus could ultimately grasp Bigger’s point, that is because, as a native speaker, he tacitly knows that part of Signifying which Abrahams phrases as “the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point” ⁽⁸⁾.

In this context, two key passages point to a type of Signification analogous to that which the slaves use in Douglass’ *Narrative*. The first passage reveals that the Whites are quite aware of, but not always able to correctly interpret, the African-Americans’ tricky language and their displayed emotions:

‘Listen, Peggy. Tell me, [Britten asks,] how does this boy act?’
‘Does he seem intelligent? Does he seem to be *acting*?’
‘I don’t know, Mr. Britten. He’s just like all the colored boys.’
‘Yes, Mr. Britten. He’s polite.’
‘But does he seem to be trying to appear like he’s more ignorant than he really is?’ (N.S., p. 230)

As to the second passage, it depicts Bigger’s subversive strategies in his attempt to prove his innocence and to blame the murder upon Jan. Playing with White assumptions and stereotypes, he controls his words, his face expressions and gestures in such a way to trap the interrogators into misinterpretations:

Bigger knew the things that the White folks hated to hear Negroes ask for; and he knew that these were the things the reds were always asking for. And he knew that White folks did like to hear these things asked for even by Whites who fought for Negroes. (N.S., p. 235)

Indeed, the narrator generously provides comments and explanations intending to show Bigger’s control of his reversing game: “He knew that the average white man would not approve of his liking such talk” (N.S., p.236); “[h]e knew that Whites thought that all Negroes yearned for White women, therefore he wanted to show a certain fearful deference even when one’s name was mentioned in his presence” (N.S., p.236). Clearly then, Bigger consistently acts contrary to the Whites’ expectations as though he prematurely learnt and mastered the course of Signifying that is “Negroes’ business”.

Not only does Bigger signify through speaking and body expression, but also by writing his own version report of the crime he has committed. If White newspapers invest so much in their reporting of crimes committed by African-Americans that these reports discard reality, Bigger had better invest in his story to make of it the most

(7) Ibid., p. 96.

(8) Abrahams cited in Gates, p. 75.

embellished kidnapping story he can invent (*N.S.*, pp. 215-216). Aware of the fact that White discourse will turn the murder into a rape story, a stereotype fiction, anyway, the protagonist seems to spare the Whites the writing of his story: "They would say he had raped her and there would be no way to prove that he had not" (*N.S.*, p. 267). Ultimately, Bigger provides a ready made version, a story being embellished enough to "make'em [the Whites] think it" (*N.S.*, p. 182).

By writing his story, Bigger is, in fact, involved in the rhetoric of pastiche. In the process, he makes substitutions and adaptations marked by expressions such as "it would be better to say. . ." or "now; that ain't good" (pp. 215-216), thus conceiving a personal version intended to trick the Daltons and mock the White discursive strategies. If Bigger's trick works, it will undermine the Daltons by making them pay twice: they will pay ten thousand dollars for a kidnapping affair that is but fiction. But, even if this immediate purpose is not realized, the idea of using a particular White discursive form, a kidnaper's letter, which destabilizes the general White social status quo, is in itself expressive of the subtlety of Bigger's investment in his story writing. Thus, Bigger displaces both the attitude of a trickster who conceals and disguises and that of an African-American artist who repeats only by difference. Both attitudes are reminiscent of that familiarity with parody rooted in early African-American article writings and both are rooted in the literature of Signification ⁽⁹⁾.

Similar to Bigger's story, Wright's narrative is made out of the material of Chicago newspaper reports. With the intention of shocking the White bourgeoisie, the author creates a story that approximates reality in many respects while providing exaggerating versions and incongruent detail. In this respect, Margaret Walker states that Wright "had been following newspaper reports of Robert Nixon, a young black man who had confessed to killing five women and raping others."¹⁰ She also confesses that she "then began an activity that lasted a year, sending Wright every clipping published in the *Chicago* newspaper on the Nixon case" and that "there were times when the clippings were so lurid I recalled from the headlines and the details in the stories where worse. They called Robert Nixon a big black baboon" ⁽¹⁰⁾. In fact, the many references to the *Tribune* are either word for word quotations or adapted citations-which is a case for the author's practice of the rhetorical strategy of repetition and difference. The working of this strategy can best be noticed in the articles that Bigger reads about himself in the prison. While these are allusions to the *Tribune's* designation of Nixon as "a big black baboon", the stereotyped attributes are so much repeated and exaggerated (pp. 317-9). The subversive power of pastiche is accordingly used to meet the objective of shocking the White readers.

(9) Gates, p. 90-3.

(10) Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man. A Critical Look at His Work* (New York: Amistad, 1988), p. 122. See also Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. , Isabel Barzun (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973[1993]), pp. 182-83.

The author's attitude towards music is oscillating between a clear rejection and an oblique affirmation. If, in the midst of his suffering, an African-American is expected to sing a spiritual or a blues bar, Bigger never does, nor does he bear giving it a listening ear. This attitude is identical with the narrator's position, for the latter displays, through his comments, a clear approval of the protagonist's rejection of music. Rather than responding in any authentic manner to his mother's song — that mixes up components of the profane blues, i.e., the railroad image, and gospel, i.e., the run from the cradle to the grave - Bigger becomes "glad when she stop[s]" (N.S,p.48). The same attitude recurs when he flees and hides in an old house. Though he is hungry, cold, chased and alone, Bigger, contrary to what one expects from an African-American in such a situation, "trie[s] not to listen [. . .] shake[s] his head, trying to rid himself of the music." (N.S, p.293) The protagonist's antagonism to the music, according to the narrator, lies in that it is "urging him to believe that all life [is] a sorrow that [has] to be accepted" and that "the music [sings] of surrender, resignation" (N.S, p.293). Later, when Bigger is poised between staying where he is or leaving, the narrator affirmatively comments on the music: "it [is] complete, self-contained, and it mock[s] his fear and loneliness, his deep yearning for a sense of wholeness. Its fullness contrast[s] so sharply with his hunger, its richness with his emptiness, that he recoiled from it while answering it" (N.S, p. 293). With such a lyrical, dramatic, and rhythmic comment, Wright is trapped in a striking ambivalence about music, for it is not consistent to reject something and, yet, comment on it in so beautiful a manner as exposed in this scene.

Wright's ambivalent attitude towards music is not limited to *Native Son*. In fact, the author would make affirmative claims for music in one work only to berate it in another. For example, in his essay "The Literature of the Negro in the United States", he urges the African-American writers to explore the forms of "things not yet known" being "the expression of the collective sense of Negro life". Wright means, of course, the blues and the oral poetry (*Dirty Dozens*)⁽¹¹⁾. These are, according to him, the material that should be molded by means and techniques borrowed from the Western novel. At other points, Wright is unequivocally rough primarily in his judgment of music. In "How Bigger Was Born", for instance, he blames African-Americans for projecting "their hurts and longings into more naïve and mundane forms of- blues, jazz, swing- and [...] try[ing] to build up a compensatory nourishment for themselves" (p. 15). When Wright rejects music, he does so because he sees in it an "affirmation of 'a protracted inability to act [. . .] [and] a fear of acting' and identify [ies] its primary motivation in guilt"⁽¹²⁾. In this sense, this expressive form of African-Americans is only "a projection of hurt in which Blacks attempted to 'compensatory nourishment for themselves'"⁽¹³⁾. Wright's ambivalence towards African-American music may be related partly to "a somewhat

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 122.

(12) Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York and London, 1993), pp. 167-9.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 158.

simplified sense of Afro-American vernacular aesthetics”⁽¹⁴⁾, and partly to his adherence to reflective Marxism. First, instead of interpreting the blues as a cultural form that is able to connect the individual experience to a communal experience through the call and response dynamics, Wright usually presents this music as a passive reaction to racial oppression. The author of *Native Son* does not consider “antiphony” which is “the principal formal feature” of the African-American musical tradition ⁽¹⁵⁾. Maybe, Wright’s overlooking of the antiphonal character of the African-American music accounts partly for the lack of a healthy communication between Bessie and Bigger and between Bigger and his family, particularly his mother. Furthermore, the same reason could be said to be behind the protagonist’s negative attitude to his mother’s song and the spiritual emanating from the church.

Second, when Wright expresses an appreciation of the vernacular expressive products, including music, his position reflects an allegiance with “Negro masses” in opposition to both the Institutionalized culture and the “Black bourgeoisie” which do not recognize Black popular culture (Gilroy, p.168). In this sense, his attitude displays a form of Black nationalism that views African-Americans as a class anticipating emancipation from an alienating capitalism and as a race with a culture that has “promoted specific forms of identity, strategies of survival, and distinct conceptions of social change”⁽¹⁶⁾. The Black vernacular is hence in the centre of a Marxist nationalist revolutionary project of class/race emancipation. Here arises the ambivalence of Wright’s Marxism. The core of such ambivalence, according to Gilroy, lies in how to reconcile “the formerly alienated interests of the Black masses [or nation] with the [Marxian] aims and ends of the Negro writer”⁽¹⁷⁾. In a manner that would be labeled as “ideal” by Marxists, Wright deems the space between “the consciousness and the interests of the [Negro] proletariat” and “racial nationalism” by positing that “Negro ‘separatism’ [a folk history] will transmute itself through dialectical logic into Black working class consciousness”⁽¹⁸⁾. If protest literature writers use, within these confinements, elements of “forms of things unknown”, it is for the sake of an inscription into the creation of “values by which their race is to struggle, live and die”⁽¹⁹⁾. Perhaps, the existence in *Native Son* of instances of Wright’s appreciation of the Black vernacular is justified by this Marxist nationalist view.

(14) Ibid., p. 158.

(15) Craig Werner, “Bigger’s Blues: *Native Son* and the Articulation of Afro-American Modernism,” Keneth Kinnamon, p. 143.

(16) Gilroy, p. 78.

(17) Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” cited in Gilroy, p.168.

(18) Baker, in Keneth Kinnamon (ed.), p. 103.

(19) Ibid, p.103.

However, when Wright thinks exclusively in terms of class consciousness, rather than in terms of the racial nationalistic ideology, he views the future as productive of “an Afro-American modern Man, born in mechanical glory from the womb of the machine”⁽²⁰⁾. So, following the Marxian deterministic historiography, he believes that “[t]he crucifying death of folk culture gives birth to Afro-American Communist Man as a sharer in the Western mechanical dream” ⁽²¹⁾.

As a matter of fact, two different authorial attitudes are behind the thematization of the Black vernacular and music in *Native Son*. While Signifying in its different forms and manifestations is shown to have a subversive power, music is not only lacking in this respect but presented without its distinctive feature and power, that is *antiphony*. Ambivalence—which is the stock in trade of Wright’s dealing with African-American culture, with Western thought and philosophical paradigms, and with Modernity and the location of blacks in it—seems to offer a possibility of reading the novel without being trapped by rigid entities such as ‘protest’, ‘naturalism’ or, even, ‘Marxism’. Rather than looking negatively at Wright’s inconsistencies, one had better turn to ambivalence and consider how far it will take his/ her reading.

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