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Black Boys, Native Sons, Rufus Scotts, and Sulas: An Exploration of Literary Dissent

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*Black Boys, Native Sons, Rufus Scotts, and Sulas:
An Exploration of Literary Dissent*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Shirley Merino

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2021

*For my Lelo, who would count down the years and weeks left until I would come home,
and who when I told him that I loved him for the last time, responded,
“Lo sé, puedo sentirlo.”*

*Every day I wish you were here,
pero todos los días puedo sentir tu amor y tu presencia.*

*I love you forever.
Te amare por siempre.*

***Wenceslao Alcantara
November 1940 – April 2020***

Acknowledgements

To my parents:

Thank you for all of the love, time, and energy that you both put into raising me. I know it was scary to leave your home countries behind at such young ages, but I hope that in the years to come I will be able to pay you back for your sacrifice and courage. I love you both forever, and because you've reminded me for 4 years to say this before I graduate (because you saw it in a car commercial), I lastly wanted to say, "Mom, Dad, this is for you."

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Thank you for always holding it down. I don't know what I would've done without Kai, Melissa, and my Boonies. I appreciate and love you all so much. Thank you for all of the laughs, late night talks, and love. I can't wait to see how we all prosper, and I am beyond blessed to have you all in my life.

To Brandon:

I would do these four years all over again if it meant I would be able to meet and fall in love with you each time. Thank you for being my rock, for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself, and for loving me so unconditionally. I love you always.

To all the project babies:

Who like me were told that this was not possible, that success is not possible or meant for *us*. I wrote this senior project in my dorm room, and when the pandemic forced us back home, in an apartment where I didn't have my own room or a desk. There are people who would not last a day in our shoes, and yet we continue to prosper, love and provide. We are not meant for success because we are meant for somewhere well beyond the stars.

This is all to say, to anyone reading this, never take no for an answer, never fold, and always remember, you can do *anything* you put your mind to.

I hope that this SPROJ, above all, is a testament to that.

All Praise to the Most High.

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“I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.’”

—**Toni Morrison**

Introduction

I hated *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *The Great Gatsby* was much more entertaining, but when Wilson ended up shooting Gatsby at the end, all I wanted to do was throw my book at the wall. Out of all the books that we had been assigned to read in my 11th grade English class, why did none of them have happy endings, and why were all of the characters white when all of the girls at my school were Black and Brown?

The issue of representation was not new to me. I loved reading, but any time that I picked up a book there was always one word that would frustrate me. *Porch*. Growing up in a concrete jungle, I had never really known what a porch was but somehow every single book that I read mentioned them. The day that I finally figured out what a porch looked like made visualizing while reading easier, besides one looming issue – in Harlem we don't really have porches, mainly stoops and steps.

By the time I had gotten to high school I had grown tired of reading books about houses with white picket fences and equally white characters. I could not relate to either of those things and because of that I knew that those books were not meant for *me*. After having to read a countless number of novels by white authors, my English teacher handed us *Native Son*, and instantly I felt excitement. It was the first book by a Black, male author that she had assigned, and judging by the blurb, 16-year-old mind was intrigued. *Finally*. I thought to myself. *A book that takes place in the city and has a Black main character.*

At the time, I had really enjoyed the novel. I was captivated by Richard Wright's prose, the story itself, and Bigger's rebellious nature. I had decided that *Native Son* was my favorite novel, and committed myself to reading solely Black and Brown authors in my free time,

because I *knew* that I would be able to relate to anything they wrote. That was however, until I got to college and was introduced to Toni Morrison for the first time. The first novel I had read by her was *Sula*. While I really enjoyed the novel itself, what really caught my attention was Morrison's foreword. Specifically, the excerpt that reads:

“If the novel was good, it was because it was faithful to a certain kind of politics; if it was bad, it was because it was faithless to them. The judgment was based on whether "Black people are--or are not--like this." It may be difficult now to imagine how it felt to be seen as a problem to be solved rather than a writer to be read. James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston--all had been called upon to write an essay addressing the "problem" of being a "Negro" writer. In that no-win situation- - inauthentic, even irresponsible, to those looking for a politically representative canvas; marginalized by those assessing value by how "moral" the characters were--my only option was fidelity to my own sensibility.”¹

Reading Morrison's foreword for *Sula* completely changed my initial perspective of *Native Son*. It made me question – is *Native Son* really that revolutionary and representative of Blackness, if Wright is portraying a Black man as a murderer, with animalistic impulses whose life is dictated by “fate” and whiteness? I could no longer look at the novel the same way. If Wright was going to create a novel that was meant to center the Black experience, then who could his audience possibly be if his novel was rooted in anti-Black stereotypes? Morrison's foreword is what inspired this project and encouraged me to look for answers regarding Wright's literary choices.

Showered with appraisal and criticism alike, Richard Wright's, *Native Son*, proved to be an exceptionally impactful novel when it was published in 1940. It was the first Black book of its kind to command the attention of white readers, who could no longer claim to be unaware of the disparities existing between Black and white people in America. The inability for the reader to turn away from Wright's alarming yet significant description of Bigger Thomas' rise and fall, cannot only be attributed to Wright's talents as a writer, but also to the rawness of the novel

¹ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xii)

itself. By releasing his novel, Wright began to define and set a precedent for future Black American authors.

Even if earlier Black authors such as James T. Stewart had warned against writing in a way that would center either the reluctance or acceptance of the white audience,² Wright's success in evoking feelings of complicit guilt within white readers undoubtedly stems from what I will define as *literary dissent* – an author's decision to write against a monolithic perspective in order to construct a viewpoint that accounts for the complexities *and* differences within a group of people.

The responsibility of creating writing that is palatable in order to please every audience *but* the Black audience is often placed on the shoulders of Black authors. As phrased by Richard Wright in his “Blueprint for Negro Writing”, the risk of focusing one's writing entirely on the Black experience, left Black authors with the risk of being “consigned to oblivion.” Writing that captures the joys, the struggles, and the history of being Black in America is often overlooked and ignored by white audiences and publishers, as it is often perceived as being unappealing and unpleasant. However, authors like Wright, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison to name a few, were able to write in a way that refused to allow the fear of being accepted by a white audience to deter them from publishing books that centered the Black audience and experience.

Even so, differences still exist between these authors with regard to the way each of them approaches literary dissent. Wright had been writing in the 40s, Baldwin in the 60s, and Morrison between the 70s and 80s. Some popular earlier novels lacked visible inclusions of Black joy and did not fully acknowledge the complexity of Blackness. Given this context, earlier writers, such as Wright, are now perceived as having written Blackness as if it were monolithic –

² Baraka and Neal, *Black Fire : An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. (6)

prioritizing the need they felt to both address and defy the White audience. Despite this critique of Wright's failure to account for Blackness in the ways that Morrison and Baldwin would later address, Wright opened the door for these future authors to develop styles that strayed away from his and that did not have to focus on centering or addressing the white audience. Despite their differences, Baldwin Wright and Morrison all share similarities in that their novels are attempting to make a point to their audiences through dissent. Through *Native Son*, Wright wanted to force white America to look at the potential consequences of their treatment towards Black people. Baldwin's *Another Country* inspected race relations and the role of white folks in upholding Black oppression, alongside the constraints of race. Morrison, the more modern author out of the three, wanted to look at Black joy and womanhood *without* the influence of the white gaze in her novel, *Sula*.

Each of the chapters of my project will be looking at these three novels separately, and occasionally, in conversation with one another. The questions I will be investigating are, how do Baldwin, Morrison, and Wright exhibit literary dissent? What are the implications of literary dissent, when, such as in Wright's case, it ends up exacerbating stereotypes and involuntarily taking on an opposite purpose? Consequently, I will argue that given the different times which each of the authors I will discuss are writing in, there is a different amount of responsibility placed on them and their writing to address the relationship between Black and white people in America, and more directly, the white gaze.

Chapter 1

The Cost of a Native Son

*He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die.*³

Prior to publishing *Native Son* in 1940, Richard Wright published an article titled, “Blueprint for Negro Writing”⁴ in 1937. Judging by the title alone, Wright’s intent with writing this piece is abundantly clear to the reader – his goal is to create a blueprint for his contemporaries *and* future Black authors to consider when writing their works. Not only does he want to inform other Black authors of his own perspective on what the Black book should look like, but more importantly, he addresses the divide between Black authors surrounding *who* to write for. According to Wright, the great divide amongst Black authors is partly because of class differences. As he describes it there are two separate cultures forming which Black authors are often separated into: “...one for the Negro masses, unwritten and unrecognized; and the other for the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered.”⁵ Wright argues that the writing of the Black bourgeoisie ends up focusing entirely on appealing to and assimilating to whiteness instead of uplifting Black voices and perspective. Instead of writing in a way that is unifying, the latter style of Black writing is *parasitic* – the influence of class leads to writing that is both restrictive, and in turn, regressive as it refuses to acknowledge the intricacies and vastness of Blackness.

³Wright, Richard. “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” In *Within the Circle*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell, 97–106. An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present. Duke University Press, 1994. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1134fjj.13>. (102)

⁴ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1134fjj.13>.

⁵ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” (99)

Complex, vast and unique, Wright believed that there is truly no one way to characterize or encapsulate Blackness, and that is what makes experience so important to the Black novel. Experience allows for intricacies to be accounted for, while simultaneously creating common threads that develop into culture. Experience is integral to Black writing and the inclusion of it into Black prose is one way to dissolve the divide between Black authors who are being separated by their class differences. As Wright frames it, documenting the Black experience is a responsibility that is appointed to, and expected to be fulfilled by, Black writers.⁶ Wright says that Black writers should write in a way that accounts for *all classes* of Black people, not just the richer classes. He adds, “By his ability to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men, because his writing possesses the potential cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because he can create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life, he may expect either to be consigned to oblivion, or to be recognized for the valued agent he is.”⁷ Experience allows for a level of intimacy that cannot be manufactured, it has to be real and genuine and from, “the inmost recesses of the human heart”⁸ if the author wishes to have any sort of success in garnering an audience. Without the inclusion of experience, there is no historical or cultural acknowledgement as the author is unconcerned with promoting a collective unity or providing comfort. Speaking to the divide existing between Black authors, Wright adds, “Under these conditions Negro writing assumed two general aspects. (1) It became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of ‘achievement.’ (2) It became the voice of the educated Negro

⁶ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” (99)

“The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and molds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today.”

⁷ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” (102)

⁸ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” (102)

pleading with white America for justice. Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations. Through misdirection, Negro writers have been far better to others than they have been to themselves. And the mere recognition of this places the whole question of Negro writing in a new light and raises a doubt as to the validity of its present direction.”⁹ In trying to separate oneself from the stories and events that molded them, there is an overwhelming loneliness that is paired with it. The writer is likely left with more questions than answers, and their reader is left with a body of work that is simply lifeless, unrelatable and, as Wright had phrased it, parasitic – it cannot give anything in return, except further ostracize those who simply cannot relate, or feel connected to, what is being written.

Although essential to the Black book, the addition of experience comes with its own risks that threaten the author with the possibility of being “consigned to oblivion.”¹⁰ Black authors who do not share the same resources, status, or education as their wealthier counterparts remain unrecognized and too often ignored because their writing “lacks palatability.” But what exactly is it that makes certain types of Black writing “unpalatable” to a wider and whiter audience, and *why* is it deemed unpalatable? The answer can be found when looking at the inclusion of and the centering of the Black experience. As can be seen throughout Wright’s *Blueprint*, a Black book that excludes experience does a great disservice to Black people by refusing to highlight, as he refers to it, “the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence.”¹¹ Interestingly, Wright refers to Black existence as *sordid*, and in the same breath, magical and bright.

⁹ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” (98)

¹⁰ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” (102)

¹¹ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” (103)

To further inspect palatability in relation to *Native Son*, the introduction of the first edition of the novel written by Dorothy Canfield Fisher – a white, former member of the Book of the Month Club’s selection committee – must be called into question. To be selected at the time was considered a milestone, as it would lead to an overwhelming amount of exposure especially for an up-and-coming writer like Richard Wright, who would also become the first African-American writer to have a novel selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club. On the other hand, while the inclusion of *Native Son* into the Book-of-the-Month Club’s catalog was considered a great leap forward for Black authors, it came at a price. In order to be considered acceptable enough for circulation, Wright had to cut out various scenes and sections of the novel that were viewed as being particularly suggestive or violent.¹² After he had made the suggested edits, such as cutting out the scene where Bigger and his friend Jack are masturbating to images of white women while in a movie theater,¹³ it was decided that the novel was *finally* palatable enough to be circulated to the Book-of-the-Month Club’s predominantly white, customers.

Wright was aware of the risk of white authors, like Fisher, utilizing the text for the purpose of attempting to “prove” Black inferiority through Bigger’s character.¹⁴ However, to combat critics like Fisher, Wright himself sought to characterize Bigger in a way that showcased his ability to recognize the oppression which he undoubtedly faces within the first couple of pages of the novel. After leaving his home following a scuffle between his family and an

¹² As I will later address in this chapter, this was the beginning of Wright straying away from his *Blueprint*.

¹³ Miles, Jack. “The Lost (and Found) Turning Point of ‘Native Son.’” Los Angeles Times, November 3, 1991. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-11-03-bk-1666-story.html>.

¹⁴ “I felt that if I drew the picture of Bigger truthfully, there would be many reactionary whites who would try to make of him something I did not intend... The more I thought of it the more I became convinced that if I did not write Bigger as I saw and felt him... I’d be reacting as Bigger himself reacted: that is, I’d be acting out of fear if I let what I thought whites would say constrict and paralyze me.” Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (448)

ominous black rat, Bigger runs into his friend Gus near the poolroom which they frequent.

Together, they share cigarettes and engage in a game where they pretend to act like “white folks.”¹⁵ Although the dialogue between these two characters begins jokingly, the conversation takes a turn when Bigger becomes frustrated and ends the dialogue between the two with his signature phrase, “Goddammit!”¹⁶

“You know where the white folks live?” “Yeah,” Gus said, pointing eastward. “Over across the ‘line’; over there on Cottage Grove Avenue.” “Naw; they don’t,” Bigger said. “What you mean?” Gus asked, puzzled. “Then, where do they live?” Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus. “Right down here in my stomach,” he said. Gus looked at Bigger searchingly, then away, as though ashamed. “Yeah; I know what you mean,” he whispered. “Every time I think of ‘em, I *feel* ‘em,” Bigger said. “Yeah; and in your chest and throat, too,” Gus said. “It’s like fire.” “And sometimes you can’t hardly breathe...”¹⁷

The shift from a tone of playfulness to one of frustration marks this passage, as Gus and Bigger turn their attention to not only the physical and professional separation between white and Black people in Chicago, but also the internalized separation that exists between the two races. Even though Cottage Grove Avenue seems to represent a physical location that sections off where white people live, Gus’ describing this divide as an imaginary line, and Bigger countering that they actually live in his stomach, demonstrates how the two characters are actively alluding to the pervasiveness of whiteness. Gus agrees with Bigger’s description, and his feeling shame towards it further indicates his mutual understanding. Their describing of the feeling that white folks live within them shows that the separation is greater than just a line – it is invasive and suffocating to the point that even when they attempt to exist on their own side of the line, it is made simply impossible as they cannot escape the “fire,” or, more specifically, the effects of whiteness in limiting and controlling their “fate.”

¹⁵ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (17)

¹⁶ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son: The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (19)

¹⁷ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (21-22)

Contradictory to Dorothy Canfield Fisher's perception that *Native Son* is somehow the first time that *anyone* has ever heard about Black plight¹⁸, Bigger, the same *fictional* character which she animalizes, possesses a greater awareness and understanding of the historical marginalization and exclusion which Black people face in America than Fisher herself. Through documenting a conversation surrounding race between two young Black men who Wright simultaneously portrays as being criminal, Wright proves that there is no connection between deviance and racial awareness. Fisher clearly overlooks the awareness which Wright ascribes to Bigger and Gus, as she shows the same level of incredulity as the white characters in the novel who *also* cannot believe Bigger's ability to articulate himself and express his suffering. Canfield Fisher is a perfect example of the type of person and critic who Wright is dissenting and writing against — those who seek to indulge in Black writing and authorship only when it is palatable and calls for sympathy, all while simultaneously disparaging Black writing when it becomes “unpalatable” – when it outlines the ways in which white folks have been complacent in creating and enforcing Black oppression.

Interestingly, this first part of the novel where Bigger acknowledges the effects of whiteness on hindering his ability to prosper is titled, “Fear.” Ranging from a cryptic poster plastered with the State Attorney Mr. Buckley's face¹⁹ that reads “YOU CAN'T WIN,”²⁰ to

¹⁸ *Native Son* is the first report in fiction we have had from those who succumb to these distracting cross-currents of contradictory nerve-impulses, from those whose behaviour patterns give evidence of the same bewildered, senseless tangle of abnormal nerve-reactions studied in animals by psychologists in laboratory experiments. It is not surprising that this novel plumbs blacker depths of human experience than American literature has yet had... This is really all I have to say about this absorbing story of a ‘bad Negro’, except to warn away from it, urgently, those who do not like to read books which harrow them up. It can be guaranteed to harrow up any human heart capable of compassion or honest self-questioning.¹⁸

¹⁹ Mr. Buckley is the same State Attorney who will eventually force Bigger to confess to murdering Mary Dalton.

²⁰ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (13)

Bigger's own internalized and consistent feeling that something bad is going to happen to him,²¹ it is clear from the start of the novel that Bigger's chances of being able to escape the grips of whiteness are slim to none. While he does have his moments where he feels prepared to tackle whiteness directly, such as when he reflects on a plan between himself and his friends to rob a white-owned store, he quickly realizes that, "...the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them... Yes; if they could rob Blum's, it would be a real hold-up, in more senses than one. In comparison, all of their other jobs had been play."²² Yet again, Wright solidifies that Bigger is conscious of the boundaries of race. He is conscious that he cannot cross the "line" which separates him from the white world. Every other robbery which he had committed was not "real" – he knows that taking from his own people will never grant him the freedom which he craves from whiteness. In Bigger's eyes, he can only snatch the freedom which he so badly desires by delving *into* the white world. Since white people won't let him "do *nothing*,"²³ Bigger knows that he has to do *something* that will allow him to validate his own existence without having to spend his life either begging for the stamp of white approval, or living up to a destiny that is out of his control – a sentiment shared by Wright in his *Blueprint*.

The overwhelming presence of whiteness which Bigger fears is further strengthened and sustained by even the most "well-meaning" of white folks, like Jan and the Daltons. As he is driving them through Chicago, Jan and Mary request that Bigger take them to, "...one of those places where colored people eat..."²⁴ out of curiosity. Additionally, building on the literary

²¹ " 'I don't know. I just feel that way. Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awfu;'s going to happen to me ...' "

Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (20)

²² Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (14)

²³ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (19)

²⁴ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (69)

dissent which Wright had previously exhibited during Bigger and Gus' conversation, Wright is yet again making an example out of feigned white ignorance and against the white gaze. Bigger Thomas is more than a character in his novel, in fact, in his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born" Wright had "made the discovery" that there were "literally millions of him, everywhere."²⁵ In the same way that Bigger is not just an imaginary character, neither are Jan and the Daltons, whom Wright includes to mirror his white readers who will likely sympathize with these characters without regard to their own involvement in creating Bigger Thomases. While preparing to write *Native Son*, Wright had a chance to volunteer at the South Side Boys' Club to study "Bigger" in person, where he discovered that the well-meaning white folks, the original Jans and Daltons, "...did not really give a good goddamn about Bigger, that their kindness was prompted at bottom by a selfish motive. They were paying me to distract Bigger with ping-pong... in order that he might not roam the streets and harm the valuable white property of the Black belt."²⁶ Per his white characters like Jan and the Daltons, Wright is directly confronting the white audience and implicating them for the creation of Bigger, both living and fictional, despite their own belief that they are somehow absolved because of their indifference or minimal contributions.

At this point in the novel when Bigger is left alone with Mary, another "well-meaning" white character, Wright will illustrate his most shocking delivery of literary dissent given that this book was written in the 1940s – the description of a Black man killing a white woman. Regardless of the fear that he had once felt about committing a crime that would throw him into the white world, Bigger's killing Mary is the *something* that he needed to do to "free" himself. Feeling compelled to burn Mary's body crosses over with his conversation with Gus, when he describes the white people that live in his stomach as feeling like a fire in his throat and chest. As

²⁵ Richard Wright, "Native Son and How 'Bigger' Was Born.," n.d. (514)

²⁶ Richard Wright, "Native Son and How 'Bigger' Was Born.," n.d. (530)

is central to the argument of this project, the act of burning Mary is one of literary dissent—Bigger is literary burning her in the same way that whiteness had been burning him. He has now symbolically emancipated himself by setting Mary ablaze, stepping away from the stereotype of Black submissiveness to whiteness and introducing his readers to a narrative of Black emancipation through violence, which to this day remains a great fear for white folks. For Richard Wright to have one of the “well-meaning” characters be killed off, Wright is again making a statement to his white readers. Her murder is Wright’s most obvious way of dissenting from the white readers, and literally *doing away with them*. Through her death, Wright declares his lack of interest in conforming to the mold of white palatability as he makes his stance clear by portraying a Black man murdering a white woman, and even more poignantly, feeling fulfilled by it. Wright accomplishes his initial goal as written in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” by ostracizing the “bankers’ daughters”²⁷ who felt compelled by his earlier works. The daughters of the white and wealthy could no longer, “read...weep over and feel good about”²⁸ a character like Mary, as they themselves are the real-life Mary Daltons which Wright refuses to cater to. Her death, is *their* death, and Bigger’s murdering Mary is so substantial that it is enough for him to feel as though he has completely freed himself not only from having to serve the Daltons, but from having to serve and be submissive to whiteness altogether.

The next chapter of the novel, “Flight”, begins with providing insight regarding Bigger’s reaction after incinerating Mary’s body: “The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared.” Wright describes it as, “...a kind of

²⁷ Richard Wright, “Native Son and How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” n.d. (531)

²⁸ Richard Wright, “Native Son and How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” n.d. (531)

eagerness he felt, a confidence, a fulness, a freedom; his whole life was caught up in a supreme and meaningful act.”²⁹ Bigger’s confidence and newfound freedom however are not enough to prevent him from continuing to commit crimes – instead he becomes emboldened which leads to his eventual demise. Although Bigger was able to enjoy his few moments existing outside of the grips of whiteness, the truth is that he was never really far, or necessarily free of it. Whiteness consistently surrounded him – whether it be through the Daltons, or the scenery, Wright makes it clear through even the most subtle descriptions that whiteness is inescapable, which is why it is only fitting that Bigger’s last true act of defiance takes place during a blizzard.³⁰ As the white snow encompasses him, the police simultaneously begin to close in on the building where he is hiding, Bigger realizes that the only option he has left is to directly confront that which he is running away from.³¹ The setting tells the reader all that they need to know – his momentary defiance will really have no lasting effect, as whiteness and its hold on his life are way too far reaching for him to avoid or destroy.

Standing atop the building now, Bigger prepares for his last act of resistance despite his impending capture. Although Wright has, as was previously investigated, set the scene with the appearance that the odds are completely against Bigger, his being on the rooftop is another symbol within itself. For the vast majority of the novel Bigger is on the ground, dragging himself through vast piles of white snow, unable to distinguish himself from anyone else in Chicago. Working for the Daltons was Bigger’s first time being around white people, and he perceived them as being – “... a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead...”³² – a perception which he occasionally maintains even after his murdering Mary. In this final scene

²⁹ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (116)

³⁰ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (242)

³¹ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (257)

³² Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (114)

however, Bigger's being on the rooftop is significant because he is literally, and finally, *above* everyone else. The "great natural force" of whiteness that he had consistently thought of as insuperable finally rested below his feet. He had reached a point where nothing, and no one, could be above him. Wright's entire description of Bigger's moments on the roof are rather descriptive and cinematic, but most importantly capture fear leaving his body. Wright begins:

A shot rang out, whining past his head. He rose and ran to the ledge, leaped over; ran to the next ledge, leaped over it... He looked ahead and saw something huge and round and white looming up in the dark: a bulk rising up sheer from the snow of the roof and swelling in the night, glittering in the glare of the searching knives of light... He wove among the chimneys, his feet slipping and sliding over snow, keeping in mind that white looming bulk which he had glimpsed ahead of him. Was it something that would help him? Could he get upon it, or behind it, and hold them off? ...He ran to another ledge, past the white looming bulk which now towered directly above him, then stopped, blinking: deep down below was a sea of white faces and he saw himself falling, spinning straight down into that ocean of boiling hate...³³

The disappearance of Bigger's fear allows him to view the white looming bulk as something that could be helpful, rather than harmful. During his moments on the roof his view of whiteness has shifted – he sees it as simply being the color of the looming object rather than something to be intimidated by or skeptical of. However, the looming bulk seems to persuade Bigger to look down, reminding him that when he is no longer able to run, he will have to return to confront that which he had sought to escape. As Wright had previously alluded to through the imagery of this scene, looking down into the sea of white faces is the moment where he realizes that there is no way for him to win, as he will have to come down eventually.³⁴

Although Bigger is written off by other characters in the novel as an impoverished young man who is only worthy of pity and charity, the way in which Wright narrates Bigger's story and

³³ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (265)

³⁴ "Dizzily, he drew back. This was the end. There were no more roofs over which to run and dodge." Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (265)

portrays his character, prohibits the white reader from feeling sympathy. In the case, how was it possible that, given the gruesomeness and unpalatability of *Native Son*, Wright was able to not only be accepted by the Book-of-the-Month Club, but by America at large? Scholar Jerry W. Ward puts the answer quite directly in his article, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” Ward writes, “Wright had created a new kind of African American novel, one that invited not sympathy but pangs of complicit, national guilt. Wright added a new twist to the penchant in certain nineteenth-century black novels for integrating recognizably literary discourse with arguments often kept at a safe distance from ‘literature.’”³⁵ Identically to Bigger, Richard Wright had found himself in a similar situation when excising scenes from *Native Son* for the Book-of-the-Month Club. Surrounded by whiteness in a publishing industry that had yet to welcome Black authors, in the same way that Bigger had been surrounded by whiteness on the rooftops, Wright had no choice but to capitulate to the demands of the Book-of-the-Month Club in order to break the mainstream barrier. Wright had to do the unthinkable and take advantage of his chance to open the door not only for himself, but for Black authors altogether. Dan McCall, an American studies professor at Cornell had named Wright “the father of the contemporary black writer”³⁶ because of his willingness to alterate *Native Son*, so that a Black book would finally enter the mainstream. And while up until this point, this chapter has maintained a view of *Native Son* as a revolutionary text because of Wright’s dissenting, as McCall also stresses given a more modern

³⁵ Ward, Jerry W. “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” In *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, edited by Maryemma Graham, 173–88. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. (17)

³⁶ Milton Moskowitz, “The Enduring Importance of Richard Wright,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, accessed November 18, 2020, https://www.jbhe.com/features/59_richardwright.html.

context, Wright's weapons are "outmoded" now, in spite of his being deemed, "the man who first conquered the big ground."³⁷

Despite Wright's interpretation of what makes a Black book, and his usage of literary dissent to attempt to ostracize white readers, one must question both his *Blueprint*, and whether or not the novel itself was successful in its ostracization of the white gaze. Black authors at the time, and prior to the 1940s, had already formed various answers to the question of what makes a Black book. For the most part, there was a consensus amongst writers like W.E.B. DuBois, James T. Stewart, and Zora Neale Hurston that it was necessary for the Black book to distance itself from "the dominant culture"³⁸ if it hoped to maintain authenticity and center the Black audience and experience. Overall, the rule of straying away from the dominant culture is just one of the features that is necessary to the Black book. And on that note, what exactly *makes* a Black book? One aspect as briefly mentioned in the beginning of this chapter is experience. While again, its inclusion creates the risk of being shunned by white editors and readers who consider the Black lived experience as something "unpalatable," James T. Stewart's description in "The Development of The Black Revolutionary Artist" overrides the fear of exclusion that Black artists may confront, by suggesting that it is embedded within American artistic culture and that the only solution is to simply continue creating works without worrying about whether or not it will be generally accepted.³⁹ Du Bois makes a similar point in his "Criteria of Negro Art"

³⁷ Milton Moskowitz, "The Enduring Importance of Richard Wright," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, accessed November 18, 2020, https://www.jbhe.com/features/59_richardwright.html.

³⁸ Baraka, Amiri, and Larry Neal. *Black Fire : An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. New York: Morrow, 1968. (6)

³⁹ "In our movement toward the future, 'ineptitude' and 'unfitness' will be an aspect of what we do... We must... make ineptitude and unfitness desirable, even mandatory. We must... be estranged from the dominant culture... he can not be 'successful' in any sense that has meaning in white critical evaluations. Nor can his work ever be called 'good' in any context or meaning that could make sense to that traditional critique."

speech, where he also addressed the issue of palatability in relation to Black experience.⁴⁰

Rather than shying away from allowing ones' history and experience to inform their art, Du Bois, like Stewart, affirms that it is pivotal in order to frame the past in a way that accounts not only for the tragedies and trauma, but also for the moments of hopefulness and joy, with Black joy specifically forming another potential feature of the Black book. In relation to experience and Black joy, both Hurston and Du Bois mention another interesting aspect of the Black book – beauty. Du Bois for example, describes it as “the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of beauty, of the preservation of beauty, of the realization of beauty...”⁴¹ While at first it sounds quite obvious what is referenced through the word beauty, their explanations give a much more elaborate interpretation on its definition and its importance to the Black book. Hurston's, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,”⁴² lists what she describes as “the will to adorn”⁴³, as being central to Black writing. Adorning language within the Black book separates it from the “bleakness”⁴⁴ that is often present within the language of white novels, and for a separate language that is specifically by and for Black people to be created in the process.⁴⁵

For the sake of this project, I will mainly be focusing on the criteria of Black joy, a straying away from the dominant culture, however not always necessary, to the Black book

Baraka, Amiri, and Larry Neal. *Black Fire : An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. New York: Morrow, 1968. (6)

⁴⁰ “This is brought to us peculiarly when as artists we face our own past as a people. There has come to us... a realization of that past, of which for long years we have been ashamed, for which we have apologized. We thought nothing could come out of that past which we wanted to remember; which we wanted to hand down to our children. Suddenly, this same past is taking on form, color, and reality, and in a half shame-faced way we are beginning to be proud of it...” Du Bois, W.E.B. “Criteria of Negro Art.” *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290–97.

⁴¹ Du Bois, W.E.B. “Criteria of Negro Art.” *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290–97.

⁴² Zora Neale. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,,” *Negro Anthology*, 1969, 39–61.

⁴³ Zora Neale. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,,” (50)

⁴⁴ Zora Neale. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,,” (54)

⁴⁵ “In this respect the American Negro has done wonders to the English language. This is true, but it is equally true that he has made over a great part of the tongue to his liking and has his revision accepted by the ruling class.” Zora Neale. Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,,” (54)

although there are obviously many more intricacies, innovations and details. Above all, what all three of these features share is that they all can be interpreted as subtle forms of literary dissent. To refuse to allow whiteness to dictate whether or not a Black book is worth reading, and to choose to center moments of Black excellence and happiness instead of solely trauma, are ways in which Black authors have created their own criteria of what a successful novel can entail, without the influence of the white gaze to degrade it. Bearing these characteristics of the Black book in mind, it is no surprise that the arrival of *Native Son* to the forefront of Black literature was met with resistance by Black authors as well. Although groundbreaking especially in its attempt to both ostracize *and* welcome the white audience, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison to name a few, argued that *Native Son* was based on stereotype and therefore made it a regressive body of work to be cautious of, rather than a progressive body of work to be praised.⁴⁶ The arguments which these authors make in regards to *Native Son* being regressive are justified when comparing the novel to the standards which Wright sets in his *Blueprint*, and to the standards of the Black book as a whole.

Granted that Wright's *Blueprint* details his own interpretation of what should be encouraged and what should be avoided in a Black book, there are many moments throughout *Native Son* where Wright goes against his *own* suggestions through his imagery, characters, and the story overall. One of Wright's critiques about Black writing is that it "Rarely was... addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations. Through misdirection,

⁴⁶ "Furthermore, Baldwin, Ellison, and Brown's responses to Wright's novel were driven not by their fundamental differences with him, but rather by their shared awareness that they were all writing in a context where their efforts to describe the social constrictions on all human agency that Peterson rightly highlights risked being read by others as an effect of black animality, subhumanity, and objecthood—a context where limitations on human agency were being read by white readers as ascribable to black individuals alone."

Negro writers have been far better to others than they have been to themselves.”⁴⁷ When taking this particular line into account, one notices that *Native Son* mainly focused on *one* of these three characteristics – suffering. Arguably, there are no moments of Black joy in *Native Son*, and the only moments where Bigger seems to feel joy are the moments in which he is harming or thinking about harming others, which then creates an issue – if the Black book is meant to stray away from the stereotypes and desires of the dominant culture, then why is Wright choosing to portray Bigger in a way that supports the white stereotype that Black men are violent? Instead of distancing himself from the dominant culture, Wright does the opposite in an attempt to appeal to both sides, Black and white. Appalled by Wright’s depiction of Bigger, James Baldwin confronts Wright’s dangerous portrayal in his essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”⁴⁸ Baldwin describes the purpose of the protest novel as avowing to “bring greater freedom to the oppressed” and in the process, doing more harm than good by mixing two separate fields – sociology and literature – and therefore creating characters that are *sociological* but not *realistic*. Instead of creating characters that are formulated from experience and imagination, the protest novel roots its creativity in sociological studies and sociological interpretations, the character thus becomes a figure that is more of an experiment than a person in the process. The danger posed by this sociological creation according to Baldwin, is that it creates characters that are unrealistic and stereotypical, which if the goal of the protest novel is to uplift marginalized people, what ends up happening is the opposite – it further dehumanizes them by portraying them in a negative, and racist way, thus performing “violence” through “language.”⁴⁹ He compares the protest novel to,

⁴⁷ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” (98)

⁴⁸ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel (1955),” in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Duke University Press, 1994), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822399889-015>.

⁴⁹ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel (1955) (18)

“...very closely resembling the zeal of those alabaster missionaries to Africa to cover the nakedness of the natives, to hurry them into the pallid arms of Jesus and thence into slavery.”⁵⁰

Wright’s straying away from following what is suggested of the Black book was clearly detrimental as he opted to root his work in harmful stereotypes. Ralph Ellison would later mention in his essay “The World and the Jug,” that, “Wright believed in the much abused idea that novels are ‘weapons,’”⁵¹ and in the case of *Native Son*, Wright has turned the weapon towards the same audience that he sought to elevate. Wright’s style of writing and framing of Black characters complicates his form of literary dissent when taking the audience into consideration. Even if literary dissent is meant to write against a monolithic perspective in order to humanize a person or group of people. Wright has by contrast, *enforced* monolithic perspectives of Black people through *Native Son* by inserting stereotypes. Seeing as how Wright failed to humanize Bigger, Baldwin refers to *Native Son* as a protest novel for the reason that even if Wright had sworn to himself that he would not write another book that evoked feelings of sadness within white readers,⁵² in the end he had done much worse – he harmed his Black readers and aroused his white readers with dehumanizing and racist portrayals of Black people. Moreover, his failure, “... lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.”⁵³

From the beginning to the end of the novel, Wright animalizes Bigger and deprives him of humanity and agency. When Bigger meets up with his friend G.H. after the murder and Mary

⁵⁰ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel (1955) (20)

⁵¹ ⁵¹ Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison: Revised and Updated* (Random House Publishing Group, 2011). (167)

⁵² Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (454)

⁵³ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel (1955) (23)

is mentioned, Wright describes Bigger as “trembling with excitement; sweat was on his forehead. He was excited and something was impelling him to become more excited. It was like a thirst springing from his blood.”⁵⁴ Later, when Bigger is preparing to collect the ransom money from the Daltons and later assault Bessie, we are given a glimpse into his internal dialogue which reads, “He was sorry, but he had to. He. He could not help it. Help it. Sorry. Help it. Sorry. Help it. Sorry. Help it now. She should. Look! She should should should look.”⁵⁵ After assaulting Bessie, he then prepares to bludgeon her with a brick, and yet again, Wright grants the audience another moment into Bigger’s mind: “His heart beat wildly, trying to force its way out of his chest. No! Not this! His breath swelled deep in his lungs and he flexed his muscles, trying to impose his will over his body.”⁵⁶ And while these are just a few examples of the ways in which Wright dehumanizes Bigger through language, there are many moments like these, where an internal feeling seems to overcome him and tempt him to engage in violent acts. What these three scenarios share – Bigger’s thirst for blood, his loss of ability to articulate while assaulting Bessie, and the description of his heart beating wildly as he prepares to kill her – are that they all demonstrate Bigger as somehow being undone from a human to something that can neither control itself or resist inflicting harm. As Baldwin interprets it, “Below the surface of this novel, there lies... a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy.”⁵⁷ Despite the fact that Wright believed that he had created a character that could encapsulate Black men and youth within the United States, citing years of meeting “varieties of Bigger

⁵⁴ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (112)

⁵⁵ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (229)

⁵⁶ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (236)

⁵⁷ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel (1955) (22)

Thomases”⁵⁸ and even going as far as joining the South Side Boys’ Club to observe them,⁵⁹ Wright fails to see how he has created a caricature instead of a symbol. Ellison phrased it best when he wrote, “...while trying so hard to improve the condition of black men everywhere; that he could be so wonderful an example of human possibility but could not for ideological reasons depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself.”⁶⁰ Within Wright’s mind, he believed himself to be practicing literary dissent in a way that would force white authors and readers to reckon with their complacency. Instead, *Native Son* wound up unintentionally centering racist ideologies and portrayals although its intent had been to warn Black authors of what to avoid when writing a Black book, and how to avoid using literary dissent in a way that would be more harmful than advantageous for Black folks.

⁵⁸ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (453)

⁵⁹ “The first event was my getting a job in the South Side Boys’ Club, an institution which tried to reclaim the thousands of Negro Bigger Thomases from the dives and the alleys of the Black Belt. Here, on a vast scale, I had an opportunity to observe Bigger in all of his moods, actions, haunts.” Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (453)

⁶⁰ Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison: Revised and Updated* (Random House Publishing Group, 2011). (167)

Chapter 2

Another Country, My Country

*The place in which I fit will not exist until I make it.*⁶¹

Despite James Baldwin's critique and distrust of *Native Son* and Richard Wright's intentions, without having read the novel and being introduced to Wright, Baldwin's rise would have likely been more tedious. As Baldwin saw it, he, "had used [Wright's] work as a kind of springboard into my own. His work was a road-block in my road, the sphinx, really, whose riddles I had to answer before I could become myself. I thought confusedly then, and feel very definitely now, that this was the greatest tribute I could have paid him."⁶² Because of Baldwin's disagreements with Wright's form of dissenting and writing the Black book, Wright was able to play the role of not only his mentor, but also an author for him to write *against*. Part of what separated these two authors was Wright's upbringing in the South, and Baldwin's upbringing in Harlem. Unlike Wright and his own father, Baldwin did not have to go through the experience of fleeing from the South.⁶³ The differences in their experiences based on where they were raised contributed to their differences in opinion of what Black art should be and who it should serve. Wright's being raised in the South and first-hand experience of Jim Crow greatly impacted his

⁶¹ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," *The New Yorker*, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

⁶² James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name : More Notes of a Native Son* / (Delta Book, 1962). (197)

⁶³ "He was born and brought up in Harlem, while Wright was born in Natchez, Mississippi, and lived in the South for a good part of his earlier life (he did not go to Chicago until 1934). For Baldwin the South is the Egypt of his ancestors, a place that will always be remote and mythical, for Wright the South was the living reality of his life even when loosely transposed to the South Side of Chicago." (68) Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," *The New Yorker*, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

perception, which can be seen through the ideas which he had presented in his *Blueprint* and other works. Oppositely, being raised in the North did not necessarily protect Baldwin from experiencing the same forms of racism and discrimination as Wright, but witnessing his father's own hatred of whites discouraged him from having similar views. Baldwin – still acknowledging the disparities that exist between Black and white people – believed that a distancing from white people would be ineffective because of the history that exists between the two groups. Finding a way to coexist, while still holding white people accountable seemed to be a more favorable solution in Baldwin's eyes. Creating a further divide would only allow for the continuation of harm between the two races, and as discussed in Claudia Roth Pierpont's, "Another Country," Baldwin was committed to keeping his "own heart free of hatred and despair."⁶⁴

Baldwin's main issue with Wright's novel, was that *Bigger* was developed not as a *man*, but as a "social category."⁶⁵ In addition, Wright's ignoring of experience, and "the traditions of Negro life"⁶⁶ struck Baldwin as being antithetical to the Black book and his own *Blueprint*, where Wright makes the claim that experience in the Black book is essential because without it, the author distances himself from his race as a whole. More notably, Baldwin critiqued Wright because he "...had become a spokesman rather than an artist..."⁶⁷. Baldwin's perception of Wright becoming a spokesman who felt compelled to speak on behalf of the Black race to white critics and audiences will be particularly important to this chapter. Despite his skepticism of Wright, one must question if Baldwin himself eventually underwent the same conversion

⁶⁴ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," The New Yorker, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

⁶⁵ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," The New Yorker, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

⁶⁶ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," The New Yorker, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

⁶⁷ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," The New Yorker, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

following his return to the United States. Spending time abroad in Europe and away from the United States, Baldwin "...began to see [America] from a different perspective.... I also realized that to try to be a writer (which involves, after all, disturbing the peace) was political, whether one liked it or not; because if one is doing anything at all, one is trying to change the consciousness of other people... You have to use your consciousness, you have to trust it to the extent—enough to begin to *talk*; and you talk with the intention of... beginning a disturbance in someone else's mind so that he sees the situation..."⁶⁸ Living in Europe had convinced Baldwin that even if he had wished to distance his writing from the political, that it would not be possible. To be a writer, was to accept an assigned role of having influence over the consciousness of many, and in accepting that role he would have to ensure that his writing would be able to have some amount of impact on his readers, regardless of their race. Given this assignment, Baldwin knew that he did not want his novels to be entirely rooted in anger so as to avoid mimicking his father, yet he also knew that he could not avoid the discussion of race. Wright's technique failed because it had fallen into stereotype, and Baldwin was aware that his form of dissenting would not fall victim to the same approach. In 1962 he published *Another Country*, a novel where he would both attempt to undo the boundaries existing between different sexualities, races and genders, while confronting the obstacles that not only sustain those boundaries, but which also make stepping away from those boundaries elusive.

Another Country starts off in Times Square, the part of the city that is often considered the heart of New York by awe-struck tourists, with an overwhelming amount of imagery to undo the picturesque nature of New York City that non-natives are often deceived by. It is past

⁶⁸ JAMES BALDWIN, "THE BLACK SCHOLAR INTERVIEWS: JAMES BALDWIN," *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 4 (1973): 33–42. (40)

midnight, and the protagonist Rufus Scott, sits alone on a balcony, wandering while the city sleeps, a moment that is often rare in New York, let alone Times Square. Interestingly, even in one of the busiest parts of the city Rufus is overwhelmed by loneliness and the feeling that “nothing of his belonged to him anymore.”⁶⁹ Though New York City is portrayed as a bustling city with “knots of white, bright, chattering people”⁷⁰ who, “showed teeth to each other, pawed each other, whistled for taxis, were whirled away in them, vanished through the door of drugstores or into the blackness of side streets”⁷¹, in reality, these moments of fulfillment are fleeting with bright lights and billboards masking the widespread isolation felt by Rufus and other characters alike. In retrospect, Rufus’ feeling lonely does not belong to him because this particular emotion is what will eventually connect him to the rest of the characters in *Another Country*. Whether it be Vivaldo’s yearning to find the right words for his novel, Ida’s desire to make a name for herself, Cass’ craving to have an identity outside of being a wife, or Eric’s trying to rediscover himself in America after living in France – the truth is that what all of these characters share is an overwhelming loneliness in a city that is meant to be abundant with possibilities. Despite their racial, gender, and sexual differences, Baldwin seeks to create bonds between each of these characters that are both physical and mental. Nevertheless, he also investigates the difficulties that arise in these relationships because of how the boundaries created by their identities undoubtedly clash. Regardless of the obstacles that arise between characters, there is an eventual fruitfulness to the relationships which they develop with one another as the characters find themselves *because* of Rufus ‘s death.

⁶⁹ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (3)

⁷⁰ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (4)

⁷¹ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (4)

Seven months before we are introduced to Rufus overcome by loneliness and wandering the streets of Times Square, Baldwin gives us a glimpse into his life before his demise. Surrounded by partygoers both Black and white in a Harlem jazz club, Rufus is described as feeling “doubly alive” as he happily dances along to the sounds of a saxophone.⁷² He prepares to leave the club, until he runs into a Southern poor white woman who he will eventually fall in love with, named Leona.⁷³ The pair seem hesitant at first in interacting with one another because of the preconceived notions which they have of each other. Although Leona doesn’t want to admit it, her body language when approached by Rufus and her uncertainty of whether or not to take his “outstretched hand or to flee”⁷⁴ contradict when moments later, she denies having a fear of Black men. She responds to Rufus when he asks if she was told to fear Northern black men that, “They didn’t never worry me none. People’s just people as far as I’m concerned.”⁷⁵ In response to Leona’s answer, Rufus thinks to himself that “pussy’s just pussy.”⁷⁶ Both of them, although seemingly aroused by one another have a way of maintaining their distance. Leona internally fears Rufus because he is a Black man, and Rufus is disgusted by Leona because she is a poor white woman, as her class affects the amount of power which she is able to possess. Despite their hesitation, both of them are willing to have sex with one another so long as their relationship is *physically transactional* and nothing more. To pursue a relationship with one another would be to cross a boundary that at the time, was only acceptable to be crossed by white men. In an interview with François Brody titled, “The Negro Problem,” Baldwin presents this issue perfectly by stating, “White men, who have been able to do what they wish with Negro

⁷² James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (8)

⁷³ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (9)

⁷⁴ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (12)

⁷⁵ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (13)

⁷⁶ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (13)

women for so long, have invented this whole concept of keeping me out of the white women's bedroom because they are afraid of my retaliation.”⁷⁷

For a brief moment during this scene between Leona and Rufus in the club, Rufus' mind fleetingly crosses over the racial boundary existing between himself and Leona. Baldwin writes, “Something touched his imagination for a moment, suggesting that Leona was a person and had her story and that all stories were trouble. But he shook the suggestion off.”⁷⁸ Granted that he quickly shakes the thought that Leona is – like him, *a person* – it is in that brief intrusive thought where their relationship, in Rufus' mind, has the possibility of being not just a physical transaction, but a chance for them to coexist with, and relate to one another. This suggestion of coexistence between a white woman and a Black man forms part of Baldwin's literary dissent that differs greatly from Richard Wright's. A glimpse into Rufus' consciousness wherein he is able to draw a connection between Leona and himself despite their racial and gender differences, and aligning their experiences by saying that *all* “stories were trouble,” corresponds to Baldwin's own ideology and perspective on “the Negro Problem” that Wright had attempted to address in his *Blueprint*. Baldwin agreed that there needed to be an acknowledgement on the part of white America of the harm that has, and had been done to Black people, but by contrast, Baldwin did not agree that the ostracization of whites was the answer. As a matter of fact, Baldwin seems to speak through Rufus while he is on the train, once again wandering through the city: “Many white people and many black people, chained together in time and in space, and by history, and all of them in a hurry. In a hurry to get away from each other, he thought, but we ain't never going to make it.”⁷⁹ The image of white and black people being chained together, in time, space,

⁷⁷ James Baldwin and François Bondy, “The Negro Problem,” *Transition*, no. 75/76 (1997): 82–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935392>. (85)

⁷⁸ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (13)

⁷⁹ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (86)

and history makes up a substantial part of Baldwin's argument that the ostracization of whites cannot be part of the package of literary dissent, and the fight for civil rights overall. Even though both races try to "get away from each other," it is impossible to ignore the historical connection that exists between the two, and as Baldwin had coined the connection as being "a wedding."⁸⁰ To continue to ignore the connection between Black and white people, as claimed by Baldwin, would further prevent the ability of the races to coexist harmoniously.

Despite Baldwin agreeing that there needed to be an acceptance on the part of white America, he also agreed that there needed to be an acceptance, rather than a reluctance on the part of Black America to recognize their interrelation. Regardless, Baldwin's dissenting against the idea of ostracization is essential because he is calling for a *collective effort* on the part of both races, rather than a transaction, as had been seen between Leona and Rufus. Baldwin's claims, stemming from prominent Black leaders like Martin Luther King who he had been able to meet and listen to,⁸¹ agree with the "solution that, in Baldwin's words, 'these people could only be saved by love.'"⁸² In another interview, Baldwin viewed the answer as, "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world."⁸³ Baldwin's achieving a new consciousness that centers on coexistence is interestingly phrased as being pivotal to ending the racial nightmare to achieve *our country*. In

⁸⁰ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," The New Yorker, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

⁸¹ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," The New Yorker, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

⁸² Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," The New Yorker, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

⁸³ Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Another Country," The New Yorker, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/09/another-country>.

its current state, the United States is a place that belongs to neither white or Black people, it is a place where neither can feel true belonging as maintained by Baldwin. The overwhelming loneliness felt by the characters is a result of the absence of a place where they are able to belong and exist without their assigned roles. Consequently, when Leona and Rufus eventually set their assumptions of one another aside and make the decision to pursue a romantic relationship, it is the judgmental eyes of the public which chips away at their bond and comfort being together in public. Baldwin expertly arranges the scene to represent his idea that the races are chained together and yet attempt to separate. While strolling through the park with their white confidant Vivaldo, Leona and Rufus are yet again placed in a scene where they are surrounded by a diverse group of people, ranging from elderly women from the East Side sitting next to “gray-haired, matchstick men”, to, “Negro nursemaids” pushing carriages past Italian laborers and their families.⁸⁴ The description of the park as being a place where all of these different racial and gender groups indirectly interact speaks to there being a possibility of coexistence. No matter their differences and prejudices interaction cannot be avoided. The way in which Baldwin sets the scene at the park, sets a mood where everyone seems to be at peace and unbothered by the presence of others.

So, while Baldwin as a Black author had chosen the “Martin Luther King” way of dissenting against whiteness, and the scene at the park begins with a vestige of hopefulness, it is clear that the path to coexistence between the races will not be an easy feat, as it would require the complete stripping down of identities and the ideologies that arise *from* those identities. The trio are still in the park when Vivaldo momentarily steps away to have a conversation with someone whom he recognizes. Almost instantly, the trio that had at first gone relatively

⁸⁴ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (28)

unnoticed by passersby is placed under scrutiny when their white friend steps away, leaving the two alone:

“Without Vivaldo, there was a difference in the eyes which watched them. Villagers, both bound and free, looked them over as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm. The pale spring sun seemed very hot on the back of his neck and on his forehead. Leona gleamed before and seemed to be oblivious of everything and everyone but him. And if there had been any doubt concerning their relationship, her eyes were enough to dispel it. Then he thought, if she could take it so calmly, if she noticed nothing, what was the matter with him? Maybe he was making it all up, maybe nobody gave a damn.”⁸⁵

Baldwin’s word choice in distinguishing between the Black and white onlookers as “bound and free” and comparing the scene to that of an “auction block or a stud farm” additionally reinforces his belief that there is an unquestionable historical link between the races. Corresponding the scene at the park to images of slavery proves that there has been little change surrounding perceptions of race, and the boundaries imposed by these perceptions. Without the presence of another white man, the bystanders are visibly appalled by Leona and Rufus’ disregard for the racial boundary that has existed between Black and white folks for centuries. Rufus becomes visibly uncomfortable, feeling the piercing stares of the villagers, meanwhile Leona remains “oblivious of everything and everyone but him.”⁸⁶ Leona’s obliviousness forces Rufus to question whether or not his discomfort is warranted, or if it is an overreaction. In the end, he chooses to believe that he is overreacting, and his capitulating proves the true magnitude of the divide that exists between himself and Leona. As a white woman, Leona is allowed to exist without feeling compelled to notice the issue of race as it does not affect her. Baldwin explains her lack of awareness as being willful, when in an interview he explains: “You must consider

⁸⁵ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (29-30)

⁸⁶ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (29-30)

that a lot of white people in America understand what's happening... But then to the extent that they understand it and to the extent that they act on what they understand, they become indistinguishable from the nigger.”⁸⁷ It is not possible to feign ignorance, and to do so would be to deny the existence of racism in America and therefore contribute to its propagation by maintaining silence. Obviously, Leona's reaction when she first met Rufus shows that she has an understanding of “what's happening”⁸⁸, while her pretending to be unaware of the stares of the villagers indicates her denial. Leona's ability to step away and Rufus' overall inability to dispel the glares and judgements of others, highlights the complicated nature of their relationship as an interracial couple, as well as the obstacles that exist between the races in being able to coincide.

Leona does not share the same struggle as Rufus. She is able to live relatively comfortably in America, and yet Rufus cannot. Despite his attempts to feign an ignorance similar to Leona's, it is impossible for him to exist under the watchful eyes of whiteness. Similarly to Bigger in *Native Son*, it is impossible for Rufus to escape the grips of whiteness and so he is forced to find ways to retaliate or risk being consumed by it. Nevertheless, despite the similarities existing between the two characters, such as their tendencies to inflict violence against women⁸⁹ and their yearning to break free of racism and whiteness altogether, Baldwin writes Rufus in a way that has its improvements from how Wright portrayed Bigger. Wright's using Bigger's character to perform literary dissent was ineffective because Bigger became a caricature that was appealing to whites as he embodied and perpetuated their racist imaginings of

⁸⁷ JAMES BALDWIN, “THE BLACK SCHOLAR INTERVIEWS: JAMES BALDWIN,” *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 4 (1973): 33–42. (37)

⁸⁸ JAMES BALDWIN, “THE BLACK SCHOLAR INTERVIEWS: JAMES BALDWIN,” *The Black Scholar* 5, no. 4 (1973): 33–42. (37)

⁸⁹ “Vivaldo found Leona sitting on the bathroom floor; her hair in her eyes, her face swollen and dirty with weeping. Rufus had been beating her.” James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (55)

Black people. On the other hand, although Rufus is by no means a perfect character, he is a foil to Bigger in that he is portrayed as a martyr, while Bigger serves as more of a warning and a lesson to white folks. Rufus is a summation of what white people imagine Black men to be like, and even how Black men might perceive themselves – he is hyper-sexualized with special attention being given to his genitalia and musical giftedness, both of these characteristics which are often stereotypes of Black people, particularly Black men. As an alternative to taking his frustration out on others, Rufus handles his frustration with the limitations which these stereotypes invoke, in a way that is mainly introspective. So, while Rufus borders many similarities and stereotypes like Bigger, the difference is that Baldwin's literary dissent is more focused on capturing the real emotions of Rufus as a Black man, rather than using him as a cautionary figure.

Rufus' is quite open with his frustration, and is unashamed in voicing it to his white friends like Vivaldo. He tells Vivaldo, "How I hate them—all those white sons of bitches out there. They're trying to kill me, you think I don't know? They got the world on a string, man, the miserable white cock suckers, and they tying that string around my neck, they killing *me*... Sometimes...I think wouldn't it be nice to get on a boat again and go someplace away from all these nowhere people, where a man could be treated like a man."⁹⁰ In parallel to Bigger's conversation with Gus about feeling that white people are living in his stomach⁹¹, Rufus shares a similar sentiment. A string around his neck, and around the world, is tightened by the white grip and deepens his feeling that his life is limited and surveilled, to the point that he is unable to live as he sees fit. His relationship with Leona is unsuccessful, and when he gives up his career as a jazz artist, he becomes homeless. While his friends and family pity his homelessness, it holds a

⁹⁰ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (68)

⁹¹ Wright and Rampersad, *Native Son : The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. (21-22)

deeper meaning to Rufus. As he perceives it, he is surrounded by “nowhere people.” Everyone around him is unable to exist as their authentic self, due to the racial, gendered and sexual boundaries that exist, and try to “kill” *him* – *his* ambitions and *his* desires, which obviously do not fit the mold which whiteness seeks to tie around him. He does not feel like he is being treated like a human as a consequence of the restrictions which have been placed on all aspects of his life – including his romantic life – and unfortunately, Rufus’ frustration ultimately leads him to take his own life, as he accepts that it will be impossible for him to exist in America as his *true self*. As the title of the novel suggests, he would only be able to be himself in another country, as a result of the great divide and limitations existing in the United States relating to identity, and the desire to exist without those limitations. By taking his own life, Rufus refused to allow white America to “kill” him. He takes to the George Washington Bridge, a popular spot in New York City for those who wish to take their life, and jumps off. The narrator writes, “He knew the pain would never stop. He could never go down into the city again... He was black and the water was black.”⁹² The imagery of Rufus being black like the water proves that he has finally found a destination where he feels welcomed – the water accepts him and its close resemblance to him provides a more welcoming feeling than the lonely, intolerant streets of New York.

Rufus’ emancipating himself through suicide in hopes of finding another country, perhaps through an afterlife, is a pivotal moment to this novel. Baldwin himself struggled with finding his place in the world and would spend time travelling to European countries in search of a place that would welcome him as a gay, Black man. The idea of one’s liberation being attainable in another country that is not the United States, is clearly not only a goal for Rufus, but for Baldwin himself. In a conversation with François Bondy, when asked if he still believes that

⁹² James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (87)

Americans are more advanced than Europeans in handling issues of race, part of Baldwin's response was: "It is in that area that I see the real trouble, the real crisis, the question of whether one is going to keep on living in a country which one has essentially invented out of nostalgia and panic, or deal with what really happened in the country and what is really happening there now."⁹³ Rufus could not handle living in the former, as it refused to acknowledge the latter – his only way of escaping the country that was made out of nostalgia and panic was to die by his own hand, or to continue living a life where his existence was both denied and dehumanized. Nevertheless, Rufus was not the only character to be aware of the string tied around the neck of his race by white America. His sister, Ida, is described as being "very race conscious" and critical of Rufus' decision to date a white woman, as she perceives his attraction to Leona as being a result of his being ashamed of his Blackness.⁹⁴ Both of the siblings understand the difficulties of living within America, but the main difference between the two of them is that Ida refuses to find, or live in, another country. By contrast, she refuses to be taken advantage of by whiteness, *or* to have her destiny be placed in the hands of whiteness – her objective is to *reclaim* a country that wishes to exclude her in place of running away from it.

Ida is unashamed of her Blackness and even then, is conscious of the ways in which American racism affects the ways in which she views herself. All the same, she is better able than Rufus to confront and combat the racist ideologies that attempt to make her feel ashamed of her skin color. When she is working as a waitress, she is often met by harmful white glares, and in return she ignores them and more importantly through her own gaze, lets them know that "she

⁹³ James Baldwin and François Bondy, "The Negro Problem," *Transition*, no. 75/76 (1997): 82–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935392>. (85)

⁹⁴ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (28)

felt them to be beneath her.”⁹⁵ Through Ida, Baldwin allows the reader to have a different perspective regarding the ways in which Black people view themselves in relation to whiteness. But more significantly, the ways in which the Black woman is forced to carry herself in comparison to the Black man, as they are often treated as having to be “strong” and altruistic, often compromising their own desires and mental health. She, overall, is the character that most resembles Baldwin’s own beliefs surrounding race. Even when she begins dating Vivaldo, and befriends Rufus’ white friends, she never allows them to alter the way in which she views and carries herself. In fact, she frequently refuses to mother them and their feelings and is unafraid to call them out when they are being dramatic about the issues that they get themselves into. Ida is a figure of literary dissent as she refuses to take on the motherly role that is often expected of Black women by white people. Moreover, she does not allow herself to be converted into an educator, which can be seen when Vivaldo invites her to a family birthday party. He tries to present the invitation as a sign of seriousness in their relationship, when in reality he really wanted to gauge whether or not his family would be accepting of his Black girlfriend – all of which Ida was intuitive of. To his request she responds,

“What might do them some good?” ... “Why—meeting you. They’re not bad people. They’re just very limited.” “I’ve told you, I’m not at all interested in the education of your family, Vivaldo.” Obscurely, deeply, he was stung. “Don’t you think there’s any hope for them?” “I don’t give a damn if there’s any hope for them or not. But I know that I am not about to be bugged by any more white jokers who still can’t figure out whether I’m human or not. If they don’t know baby, sad on them, and I hope they drop dead

⁹⁵ Ida strode past, seeming not to see them. She conveyed with this stride and her bright, noncommittal face how far she felt them to be beneath her. She had the great advantage of being extraordinary—however she might bear this distinction, or however others might wish to deny it; whereas, her smile suggested, these people, the citizens of the world’s most bewildered city, were so common that they were all but invisible. Nothing was simpler for her than to ignore, or to seem to ignore, these people: nothing was farther beyond them than the possibility of ignoring her.” James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (145)

slowly, in great pain.” “That’s not very Christian.” ... “It’s the best I can do. I learned all my Christianity from white folks.”⁹⁶

In the process of reclaiming her country and her identity, Ida makes it clear that she will not take on the responsibility of educating Vivaldo’s family on the obvious. She does not want to give him, his family, or white people in general the power to claim ignorance, as was seen between Leona and Rufus, to excuse their dehumanizing perspectives of Black people. Ida and Baldwin dissent in this way by refusing to allow the spread of not only stereotypes, but white ignorance towards the issue of racism in America. They do not place the blame on Black people for refusing to educate whites as the cause for its perpetuation, but rightfully assign the blame to white denial.

On the subject of white denial, Ida frequently brings up that neither Vivaldo, or his white friends have *paid their dues*.⁹⁷ Simply put, the white characters in the novel have not yet reckoned with how the white denial that they engage in led Rufus to take his life, and contributes to the oppression of Black folks in general. Scholar Robert Tomlinson also seeks to define paying ones dues, adding, “Thus, we can begin to see what Baldwin might have understood ... about ‘payin’ one’s dues’ ... The voyage toward self-discovery...was only granted at the price of physical deprivation and spiritual pain, and at its heart lay the existential knowledge that everything must be paid for.”⁹⁸ Ida has suffered enough, and her suffering has allowed her to develop a deeper consciousness of the world around her and the ways in which those who surround her function. She is unphased by the harmful glares she receives from white folks, and

⁹⁶ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (279)

⁹⁷ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (277)

⁹⁸ James Baldwin and Robert Tomlinson, “‘Payin’ One’s Dues’: Expatriation as Personal Experience and Paradigm in the Works of James Baldwin,” *African American Review* 33, no. 1 (1999): 135–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2901316>. (136)

is uninterested in educating Vivaldo's family because unlike them, she has paid her dues and possesses a self-awareness that they themselves lack. As she says in her final soliloquy, "...And I *had* been robbed—of the only hope I had. By a group of people too cowardly to even know what they had done... I didn't really much care what happened to me. But I wasn't going to let what happened to Rufus, and what was happening all around me, happen to me. I was going to get through the world, and get what I needed out of it, no matter how."⁹⁹ Even though Rufus' white friends thought themselves to be well-meaning by befriending him, because "he was so much nicer than"¹⁰⁰ Ida, Rufus blindly allowed for them to continuously use him for their own needs, until they had eventually torn him "limb from limb, in the name of love."¹⁰¹ Ida's witnessing her brother be treated as disposable by white people warned her of the dangers of compromising her identity for white acceptance. By the end of the novel and in the same soliloquy, she admits to using Vivaldo for her own pleasure and needs, while simultaneously being unfaithful to him with Steve Ellis, an advertising executive to launch her music career. While Vivaldo is hurt by her confession, Ida remains unapologetic. Vivaldo and Ellis were both known for paying to sleep with Black women and using their bodies for their own pleasure. To get through the world and to get what she needed out of it, Ida both voluntarily and involuntarily avenges these women by mimicking what had been done to them to these two white men – taking advantage of their bodies to get what *she* needs. Given that Baldwin published *Another Country* in the 60s, the portrayal of a Black woman taking advantage of white men and having control over her own body, instead of the more common inverse portrayal, is a groundbreaking moment of literary dissent.

⁹⁹ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (417)

¹⁰⁰ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (415)

¹⁰¹ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (265)

At Rufus' funeral, the priest comments, "And I tell you something else, don't none of you forget it: I know a lot of people done took their own lives and they're walking up and down the streets today and some of them is preaching the gospel and some is sitting in the seats of the mighty. Now, you remember that. If the world wasn't so full of dead folks maybe those of us that's trying to live wouldn't have to suffer so bad."¹⁰² Rufus took his life to escape the dead people – those who refused to pay their dues – and Ida committed to separating herself from the "dead" so as to be the controller of her own life. Rufus and Ida are Baldwin's two different depictions of what happens when Black dreams and aspirations are either stifled by racism or seemingly overcome but at the price of suffering. Both characters engage in interracial relationships, highlighting the complexities that exist and the ways in which Black partners are often commodified, being used for pleasure and as educational tools. Rufus' realizing the exploitation that he faced at the hands of *all* white people – whether they loved him or hated him – compelled him to go searching for another country, one that to him, did not exist. Witnessing her brother be taken advantage of by the stereotypes that made him out to be a figure that could only provide sex and entertainment, Ida knew that she could not give up her own sense of self to please those who did not even have their own identity, and whose only sense of identity was rooted in the exploitation of others. She does not go searching for another country like Rufus because she is too busy making the country that seeks to exploit and exclude her, *her own*.

Another Country is a novel that explores various relationships that cross societal boundaries, but by the end of the novel it more importantly offers the character Ida who refuses to be confined by *any* of the categories which white society places her in, or to accept *any* of the identities which they assign to her. In a later interview with Nikki Giovanni, Giovanni states that

¹⁰² James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (121)

the only thing that has “really changed since Martin Luther King is the black woman,”¹⁰³ to which Baldwin disagrees, suggesting that she has *not* changed, but has become more visible. Ida’s vocalizing her contempt for the stereotypes that peeled away at her brother, her using Vivaldo and Harris, and her open rejection of being used for white consumption, disagree with Baldwin. As Giovanni later refuted, Black women *did* change in that they had become more open with making demands and voicing disagreements instead of allowing men to make decisions for them.¹⁰⁴ Ida is an improvement from Wright’s Bessie because of how independent she is, and because Baldwin avoids the trope of adding her in to solely be used as an object of abuse. That is to say, however, that even though Ida is significantly more conscious and proud of her identity as a Black woman, issues still arise in confronting *how* the Black women should be written. Ida is still forced to suffer in order to have the occasional moment of joy, which, as was seen through *Native Son*, suffering should not be considered a main component of the Black book *or* of literary dissent, which until this point has mainly been defined through the male perspective. The perspective of a Black woman is still missing, and the question of how Black women should be portrayed must be raised.

¹⁰³ James 1924-1987 Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962). (121)

¹⁰⁴ James 1924-1987. Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue*, [1st ed.]. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973). (66-67)

Chapter 3

You Can't Turn a Sula Into a Housewife

*If I tried to write a universal novel, it would be water.*¹⁰⁵

In an interview with Cecil Brown for *The Common Reader*, Toni Morrison had been asked about her predecessor Richard Wright, and whether or not she felt that Wright had to carry the burden of feeling compelled to “do more for the reader than writing a novel”¹⁰⁶. In a similar vein to Baldwin, Wright felt that creating a consciousness surrounding race relations in America was necessary by taking two different approaches. Wright wanted his white readers to feel cautioned about what their continued involvement in the oppression of Black people would lead to, and correspondingly, Baldwin wanted his white readers *and* Black readers to understand the history existing between the races, and how feigned white ignorance allows for the oppression of Black people to fester. Toni Morrison was not concerned with centering her writing on educating white readers. If they wanted to read her books, they could, but was she going to make it her duty to carry their burden? No. Morrison would respond to Brown’s question, “Black women don’t seem to be interested in this confrontation. The political situation changed from Wright’s time to now. That is the difference now—why black women are not interested in the confrontation. In the 1960s, there were nearly no black women novelists published. Paule Marshall was published in 1959, and she wasn’t interested in the confrontation. Was Zora Neale Hurston? I don’t know about this. I’m just wondering if there’s a different interest. It is as though black women writers

¹⁰⁵ Toni Morrison, *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1994). (124)

¹⁰⁶ “Interview With Toni Morrison | Common Reader,” accessed April 16, 2021, <https://commonreader.wustl.edu/c/interview-with-toni-morrison/>.

said, ‘Nobody’s gonna tell our story.’ Nobody but us.”¹⁰⁷ While Black men were interested in either assimilating to or combatting whiteness, Morrison and other Black women authors avoided partaking in that confrontation. The role of her writing would not be to explain or confront what had been dubbed by the white audience as “The Negro Problem,” as other Black authors in the 60s, including Baldwin and Wright, had taken it upon themselves to address.

Morrison’s response to answering “The Negro Problem” was to simply make it clear that she would not write for the white gaze, and that to address the problem would be to acknowledge the racist idea that a “Negro Problem” existed in the first place. Her refusal to write for the white gaze is one of the most direct forms of literary dissent that has been investigated in this project. On the subject, she says in an interview, “I guess I was just that arrogant. Nobody was going to judge me, because they didn’t know what I knew. No African-American writer had ever done what I did—none of the writers I knew, even the ones I admired—which was to write without the White Gaze. My writing wasn’t about them.”¹⁰⁸ In comparison to Baldwin and Wright, her directness and stance are influenced by both the time in which she was writing and her gender. The question of whether or not to write for the white gaze which her predecessors had been burdened with was a nonfactor in Morrison’s writing. So, while *Another Country* and *Native Son* were revered because of the racial boundaries they crossed, they lacked an honest exploration of Blackness and its nuances. Morrison felt: “It is an easy job to write stories with black people in them. I look beyond the people to see what makes black literature different. And in doing this my own style has evolved.... So it is not a question of *a* black style, but it is a question of recognizing the variety of styles, and hanging on to whatever that ineffable quality is that is

¹⁰⁷ “Interview With Toni Morrison | Common Reader,” accessed April 16, 2021, <https://commonreader.wustl.edu/c/interview-with-toni-morrison/>.

¹⁰⁸ “The Truest Eye,” Oprah.com, accessed October 13, 2020, <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/toni-morrison-talks-love>.

curiously black.”¹⁰⁹ Bigger and Rufus are obviously black protagonists, but their characters are never allowed to fully develop or understand their identities as Black people, as their purpose is diminished to simply explaining and confronting whiteness. Morrison’s style of excluding the white gaze allows her to account for the many variations of Blackness, while avoiding stereotypes altogether. The “ineffable quality” that is “curiously black” takes precedence in her novels, as she explores themes of Black love, Black independence, Black language, and more significantly Black womanhood.

However revolutionary Morrison’s intention was to write literature that accounted for the complexities of Blackness, a space for Black women in literature still did not exist even after Baldwin and Wright had entered the mainstream. Between the years of 1950 and 2000, only 2% of novelists in publishing were Black, while 97% were white.¹¹⁰ In 1967, Toni Morrison arrived to Penguin Random House where she would become the first Black female editor in the history of the company. She would go on to publish authors like Muhammad Ali, Henry Dumas, and Huey P. Newton, making it clear that her role was indeed to publish promising books, but more notably, to bring the voices of Black authors who had been ignored for far too long to the mainstream.¹¹¹ On the subject of marginalized groups fighting to be acknowledged and respected in the arts, women in the 70s were still struggling to exist outside of the domestic roles imposed upon them. Male presence continued to dominate the arts, and more generally, spaces of higher education and employment. Growing tired of the housewife role, women between the 1960s and 70s revived the women’s liberation movement, seeking to finally emancipate themselves from

¹⁰⁹ Toni Morrison and Nellie McKay, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” *Contemporary Literature* 24, no. 4 (1983): 413–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208128>. (427)

¹¹⁰ R.J. So, *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction* (Columbia University Press, 2020), <https://books.google.com/books?id=dbneDwAAQBAJ>. (Introduction, 3-4)

¹¹¹ “Toni Morrison Dies at 88,” penguinrandomhouse.com, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://live-global-penguinrandomhouse.pantheon.io/announcements/toni-morrison-dies-at-88/>.

domestic roles and to be treated equally and fairly to men. Despite the movement being referred to as the *women's* liberation movement, a huge problem loomed – who was included, and who was excluded? The women's liberation movement at the time can be likened to today's white feminist movement, where inclusivity is alluded to but not realized. Black women were left out of the women's liberation movement unless their ideas and contributions were to be used¹¹² – all of which Toni Morrison addresses in an article written for The New York Times, titled, “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib”, where she argues that the women's liberation movement is simply a family quarrel between white men and women – a quarrel that does not include Black women.

In regards to literary circumstances and women's liberation, Black women had far too often been used as “surrogate mothers”¹¹³ according to Morrison. She explains, “These surrogate mothers are more serviceable than real mothers not only because of their constancy, but also because, unlike biological mothers, you can command them and dismiss them without serious penalty. ...there will always come a time when these surrogates leave—they either exit the narrative itself because they are no longer relevant to it, or they leave the life of their mistress because their value as teachers is reduced when the cared-for matures, or when circumstances have changed: moving away, insubordination, or death.”¹¹⁴ Black women, as Toni Morrison

¹¹² “In spite of the fact that liberating movements in the black world have been catalysts for white feminism, too many movements and organizations have made deliberate overtures to enroll blacks and have ended up by rolling them. They don't want to be used again to help somebody gain power—a power that is carefully kept out of their hands.” Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib,” *The New York Times*, August 22, 1971, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/22/archives/what-the-black-woman-thinks-about-womens-lib-the-black-woman-and.html>.

¹¹³ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard : Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, First edition. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019). (341)

¹¹⁴ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard : Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, First edition. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019). (341)

phrased it, were used as "... the means by which white women can escape the responsibilities of womanhood and remain children all the way to the grave"¹¹⁵ in both the literarily world *and* the real world. While simultaneously fighting for women's liberation, white women were simultaneously denying Black women their *own* liberation by reducing them to disposable figures of wisdom and care, instead of equal partners in the fight for equality. Overall, Morrison knew she could not depend on anyone to voice the beauty, struggle and experience of Black womanhood besides herself as a Black woman. She refused to play to the stereotype of the white surrogate mother or the Black housewife. If it was between breaking into the space of mainstream fiction and sacrificing her own perspectives, or writing a novel that she felt was true to the Black experience without receiving recognition, Morrison chose the latter. Luckily, her decision to stay true to depicting *real* Black experiences instead of writing what her white audience would expect of her, paid off – Morrison was able to find literary success through her novels, with one of the novels that granted her a ticket into the mainstream being, *Sula*.

Morrison had begun writing *Sula* in the late sixties following a divorce that left her a single-mother struggling to balance her work life as a publisher at Random House, her two children, piling bills, and more importantly, her identity outside of these roles.¹¹⁶ What made remembering her identity as an individual easier, was connecting with other, single, female parents and trading with them, "Time, food, money, clothes, laughter, memory and daring. Daring especially, because in the late sixties, with so many dead, detained, or silenced, there could be no turning back simply because there was no 'back' back there."¹¹⁷ Writing *Sula* during

¹¹⁵ Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," *The New York Times*, August 22, 1971, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/22/archives/what-the-black-woman-thinks-about-womens-lib-the-black-woman-and.html>.

¹¹⁶ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xiv)

¹¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xiv)

the height of various movements, including the civil rights and the women's liberation movement, Morrison's relationship with these other parents was essential to the creation of *Sula*, as it made her question, " 'What would you be doing or thinking if there was no gaze or hand to stop you?' I began to think about just what that kind of license would have been like for us black women forty years earlier. We were being encouraged to think of ourselves as our own salvation, to be our own best friends. What could that mean in 1969 that it had not meant in the 1920s?"¹¹⁸

During the time that Morrison was asking herself this question, she took it upon herself to publish Black women writers like Angela Davis and Toni Cade Bambara.¹¹⁹ As opposed to Wright and Baldwin, who had published their novels in the early 40s and 60s, *Sula*, was being written during a time of struggle and liberation, especially for women. Whereas Wright and Baldwin were struggling to exist as Black men under the white gaze, Black women were figuring out how to invent themselves and survive while depending on and learning from one another, without time to really worry about, or care for, the white gaze. This profound difference informed the creation of *Sula*, as the inventing of the self without the white gaze, *or* the Black male gaze is essential to the novel. The ending of the foreword reads: "In *Sula* I wanted to explore the consequences of what that escape might be, on not only a conventional black society, but on female friendship. In 1969, in Queens, snatching liberty seemed compelling. Some of us thrived; some of us died. All of us had taste."¹²⁰

Following her own method of refusing to coddle her white readers, *Sula* is a great example of the kind of novel that Morrison wanted her Black readers to engage with, and her successors to heed. *Sula* begins in a Black neighborhood in Ohio that is referred to as the Bottom

¹¹⁸ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xv)

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¹²⁰ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xvii)

because of its infertile land, and because of it being considered a joke by the white farmer who had sold the land to a Black laborer. Before being converted into a golf course for future white residents as Morrison foreshadows, the Bottom is described as being a place by and for Black people that was considered undesirable by whites. She opens the novel with,

“They are going to raze the Time and a Half Pool Hall, where feet in long tan shoes once pointed down from chair rungs. A steel ball will knock to dust Irene’s Palace of Cosmetology, where women used to lean their heads back on sink trays and doze while Irene lathered Nu Nile into their hair. Men in khaki work clothes will pry loose the slats of Reba’s Grill, where the owner cooked in her hat because she couldn’t remember the ingredients without it. There will be nothing left of the Bottom...”¹²¹

In her foreshadowing, Morrison offers us a glimpse into the past and future. The pool hall and grill – both prime locations for socializing and joy are to be destroyed, along with the hair salon the Black women of the Bottom frequent. Immediately, the reader is bestowed with images of cultural destruction. The description of the hair salon is particularly striking, because of its importance as a place for Black women to socialize and escape. Even more poignantly, while Morrison is foreshadowing what will become of the Bottom, she is also setting a scene that is undeniably Black. Her mentioning of the women having Nu Nile lathered into their hair, and the owner who needed her hat to cook or she would not be able to remember her ingredients, are both characteristic of Black culture and tradition. A non-Black reader would likely not understand the importance of these traditions and places to the characters and to Black readers – she offers no explanations and is already beginning to root *Sula* into one of the aspects of the Black book, *experience*. Whether or not her readers are able to understand her references does not concern her as she makes it clear from the beginning that this novel will offer no explanations or coddling. This is *her* interpretation of a Black book – an interpretation that will

¹²¹ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (3)

not be affected by what white readers and critics would consider to be either palatable, or accurate.

In her foreword for *Sula*, Morrison begins by speaking to the difficulties of being a Black female author who, regardless, will have members of different races reading and reacting to her work who will struggle to empathize with her characters and their experiences.¹²² Previously, Morrison's novels had been scrutinized based on whether or not reviewers felt that her characters fit how Blackness is perceived by whiteness. In writing *Sula*, Morrison's deciding that the majority of her main characters are Black women, demonstrates her desire to look at how their experiences are affected by their gender and race, but more importantly how it is possible for them to exist as being Black and female without making them into surrogate mothers, housewives, or caricatures.¹²³ Her portrayal of Black women in *Sula* is characteristic of literary dissent in that she will not allow her characters to be feeble or reliant on other male characters. Her characters are complex, and although they have their similarities and differences, what is most important about them is that they are all individuals whose differing experiences inform their way of being, regardless of their being connected through race and gender. Although their physical characteristics are unchangeable, internally they are able to separate themselves from societal expectations, all while maintaining different qualities of their Blackness. Her novels would not be universal like Baldwin's, or protest fiction like Wright's. In fact, she would later refer to her own work as *village literature* – a form of fiction meant *for* the village – namely Black audiences from all walks of life seeking literature that embodies their lived experiences without the usual hyper focus on Black trauma.¹²⁴ Centering Black women as autonomous beings

¹²² Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xii)

¹²³ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xii)

¹²⁴ Thomas LeClair, "'The Language Must Not Sweat,'" *The New Republic*, March 21, 1981, <https://newrepublic.com/article/95923/the-language-must-not-sweat>. (120-121)

in *Sula* indicated a leap forward for Black literature – a leap that sought to leave behind previous portrayals of Black people that catered to white perceptions, and excluded Black readers.

In the same vein of palatability, independence, and accuracy, the main characters of the novel greatly differ from everyone else in the Bottom. Even if the Bottom radiates culture, the people of the Bottom besides the main, Black female characters, still hold a homogeneous view of what Black womanhood should look like. Compared to the other residents of the Bottom, Morrison's characters are viewed as outliers, with the main three having physical differences that also separate them from everyone else. Sula's birthmark, Nel's nose and Eva's missing leg, are all physical indicators of their being different, as they are often judged by these particular features. Besides these visual markers which are scrutinized and used to ostracize them, each of these women also have to struggle with their own internal conflicts that exist outside of their race and gender. Morrison purposely allotted her characters internal struggles, as they would place them in opposition to their environment, and the stereotypes that exist *within* their environment. Besides the brief glimpses into how the protagonists are perceived by men and women in the Bottom, contrary to Wright and Baldwin, the Black women in this novel are very rarely focused on the opinions of men, let alone concerned with appeasing them. The purpose of the novel is not to investigate relationships between Black women and men, or the ways in which Black women should behave. Alternatively, Morrison is looking at: "What is friendship between women when unmediated by men? What choices are available to black women outside their own society's approval? What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static community?"¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xiii)

The character Nel is a young girl when she becomes aware of her desire to exist as an individual. Her mother Helene is a white-passing Black woman who attempts to exist in society as a white woman because of her own self-hatred. Nel's darker skin, broad nose, and generous lips¹²⁶ are subject to criticism by her mother, who constantly belittles her looks. Helene sees Nel's Blackness as undesirable and she goes as far as telling her to pull her nose to make it thinner to fit Eurocentric beauty standards. Ultimately however, there is nothing that Helene can do to mask Nel's Blackness.¹²⁷ Differing from Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* however, Nel does not allow for her mother's own self-hatred, or the critiques of those around her regarding her appearance to affect her self-esteem. After traveling through the South to return to the Bottom and watching her mother embarrass herself by trying to sit in a whites-only cart, Nel experiences an awakening that stimulates her to explore her identity as a Black woman, and as an individual:

There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her. 'I'm me,' she whispered. 'Me.' Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant. 'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.' Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear.¹²⁸

Initially, Nel is unsure about how to feel as she observes herself. Looking in the mirror, one of the features that she points out is "the nose her mother hated." Up until this point in her life, the way in which she perceived herself had been mainly through her mother's negative lens. To shed away her mother's perspective, she reminds herself that she is not Helene's daughter, but Nel the individual. In this moment, she makes the personal decision to embrace her Blackness with pride instead of distaste in the way that her mother had. She feels powerful, but above all *joyous*. There are no white characters, like in *Native Son* and *Another Country*, to take away or make her

¹²⁶ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (18)

¹²⁷ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (28)

¹²⁸ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (28)

question her Black girl joy. While Rufus and Bigger struggled to confidently exist in their own skin, Nel as a child makes it clear that *no one* is going to make her feel ashamed. Out of the three novels, Nel's cementing herself in her identity is one of the first real moments of Black joy. Like her predecessors, Morrison could have easily taken the path of documenting Nel's self-hatred, but rather than provide a perspective of Blackness that is bleak, she opts to dissent by capturing the joy that Nel feels in being Black. She does not want to imagine life any other way, or as a different race like her mother tried to impose on her. She wants to be "...wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful."¹²⁹

Nel is later introduced to Sula, another young Black girl who lives in the Bottom and is also confident in her identity and its formation. Although they possess Black pride at a young age, they are all together conscious of the judgement that they will have to face because of their race and gender, "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on."¹³⁰ To compromise their individuality would mean that they would have to conform to the social and sexual standards set by men around them, *regardless* of their race. Neither Nel or Sula wish to conform. To do so would mean to live a life appeasing everyone *but* themselves. To avoid being caught in a similar lifestyle like Helene who is constantly worried about the opinions of others, Nel and Sula become best friends, and bond together to form a female force that cannot be controlled by outside influences. In turn, Morrison uses their bond to illustrate the importance of Black female friendship that is untainted by men and societal standards. The purpose of their friendship is for the two to grow together and discover themselves without outside influences.

¹²⁹ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (29)

¹³⁰ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (52)

Together, the pair are able to experience complete *joy* in their identities as Black girls. They are able to dream about boys in the way that any pre-teen would, feeling “delight”¹³¹ when they walk past Ajax, an attractive, older man whose looks and foul mouth enchant them. Separately, “they were solitary little girls”¹³², but together, “they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for.”¹³³ In each other’s presence they are able to feel joy and forget their parents who are either too strict, absent, or barely present. After meeting Sula, Nel completely lost the desire to pull her nose in the way that her mother had wanted her to.¹³⁴ The hot comb, that Black girls are often forced to sit through to have their curls transformed into straight hair, “no longer interested her.”¹³⁵ Nel and Sula are Morrison’s examples of girls just being *girls*, but more importantly, Black girls reveling in Black joy and pride.

Eventually, when the two become older, Sula is particularly interested in confronting male authority. She establishes an identity for herself that completely contradicts what would be considered acceptable of women in the Bottom. While it appears to be unconfirmed in the novel, Sula is rumored to have been sleeping with white men, an action that similarly to *Another Country*, is met with disgust. Before Sula can have a chance to either confirm or deny the claim, it is far too late – the men of the Bottom have already decided for her: “But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing--the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed

¹³¹ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (50)

¹³² Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (51)

¹³³ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (52)

¹³⁴ “ ‘Don’t you want a nice nose when you grow up?’ ‘After she met Sula, Nel slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed.’” Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (55)

¹³⁵ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (55)

away. They said that Sula slept with white men.”¹³⁶ Regardless of whether or not the claims are false, Sula is unable to rescue herself from the identity assigned unto her based on her alleged actions. Sula remains unphased, and by choosing to not explain herself, makes it clear to the people of the Bottom that neither the white gaze, *or* the Black gaze could rob her of exploring her identity and desires. Morrison portrays her as a truly autonomous and transgressive figure who is free to be an individual regardless of the risks it presents, in this case being social ostracization.

Sula’s moment of confronting male authority is just one example of female defiance within *Sula*. Eva, who is Sula’s grandmother, defies the nurturing role that is often assigned to Black women when her daughter Hannah asks why she would never play with them. She answers that there wasn’t any time for it, and that her *raising* Hannah was a form of affection.¹³⁷ Earlier, Eva recounts having to burn her son Plum alive as another form of affection owing to his struggles with addiction, explaining, “I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man.”¹³⁸ Her own son who she loved could not even force her to live up to the stereotype that Black women are meant to be unconditional lovers and healers. Eva is in complete defiance of this stereotype – her affection towards her children is not outwardly shown, and when it was towards Plum, it was in a way that

¹³⁶ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (112)

¹³⁷ “I didn’t mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin’ ‘bout something else. Like. Like. Playin’ with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?” “Play? Wasn’t nobody playin’ in 1895. Just ‘cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad.” ... “But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn’t thinkin’ ‘bout...” “No time. They wasn’t no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night... What you talkin’ ‘bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?” Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (69)

¹³⁸ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (72)

would not be considered palatable. A mother killing her son would normally be viewed with outrage, but in Eva's case taking Plum's life was an act of affection – one where he would no longer have to suffer or rely on Eva – but also an act of exhaustion, as she could no longer bare to sacrifice her own wellbeing to care for him, as is often expected of Black women.

In a later scene that is reminiscent of Eva burning Plum, Sula watches her mother Hannah burn alive and instead of running to her aid, watches her burn “because she was interested.”¹³⁹ Once again, one of Morrison's female characters is exhibiting defiance by expressing a non-traditional reaction. What more closely connects these two scenes besides defying roles of nurture, is the fact that there is additional defiance regarding the fascination with and the enacting of violence *by* women. Sula's interest in watching her mother burn offers a different perspective – one where instead of a girl being offput by violence, she is intrigued by it. When engaging with the scene of Hannah burning, readers often share feelings of incredulity and disgust. How could a daughter possibly watch her mother burn, *and* enjoy it? Sula's attraction to violence is not to be considered a flaw of character but more so an attraction that distinguishes her. Richard Wright had used one of his only Black female characters, Bessie, as a sacrificial lamb, and Baldwin, although an improvement from Wright, still had scenes where Ida, his more racially conscious character, was subjected to abuse and commodification. For Morrison to finally write a Black novel where Black women are able to exist without the fear of having violence inflicted upon them, and can instead, take interest in that violence, is extremely important. Again, she allows for there to be room for Black women to exist beyond the roles of nurturer or victim at the hands of male violence. As has been argued, women inflicting and being interested in violence is not considered appropriate and begs the question – why was there a lack

¹³⁹ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (78)

of white outrage when Morrison's male predecessors inflicted violence upon Black women in their novels, but when Black women engage in, or are intrigued by violence, there is an aversion? Morrison is not writing Bessies and Marys, she is writing Sulas and Evas – women who will not exist solely as objects of abuse, but as autonomous beings, without regard as to whether or not they are palatable, or *likeable*. In a later interview where she is discussing whether or not some of her characters are “likeable,” Morrison answers, “The people in these novels are complex. Some are good and some are bad, but most of them are bits of both. I try to burrow as deeply as I can into characters. I don't come up with all good or all bad... It seems to me that one of the most fetching qualities of black people is the variety in which they come, and the enormous layers of lives that they live. It is a compelling thing for me because no single layer is ‘it.’”¹⁴⁰

The layers of Blackness and Black lives are thoroughly documented and shaped within Morrison's works. Although she does include aspects which are central to the Black book like experience and Black joy within *Sula*, there is no specific style or recipe to her work. Her work avoids being formulaic because it is authentically written without regard for the white gaze. The “burden” of “universality”¹⁴¹ that had fallen upon the shoulders of other Black authors were brushed off of hers. Of course, Morrison was not the first, or the last Black author to write novels looking at the lives of Black folks, but what separated her from the rest was her ability to create characters who are conscious of their race without allowing it to confine them. In *Sula*, her main characters are joyous about being Black despite their being aware of how the world views them. Morrison does not allow for their awareness to hinder their Black joy and pride, as had been the

¹⁴⁰ Toni Morrison and Nellie McKay, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” *Contemporary Literature* 24, no. 4 (1983): 413–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208128>. (420)

¹⁴¹ Thomas LeClair, “‘The Language Must Not Sweat,’” *The New Republic*, March 21, 1981, <https://newrepublic.com/article/95923/the-language-must-not-sweat>. (124-125)

case for Rufus and Bigger. She allows her characters to exist without the fear of being perfect, whether it be for Black folk, or for white folk. Their significance is not based on their being perfect or likeable, but on their intricacies and flaws which make them profound. In her foreword for *Sula*, Morrison confesses to regretting the way in which she had written her introduction. Despite her being the most candid of the three authors in her dissent, Morrison unfortunately had also been briefly forced to cater to the white gaze in a way that is similar to Wright, who had been compelled to edit *Native Son* for the Book-of-the-Month Club. Morrison's relative newness as an author had pressured her to do the same within her introduction and for comparable reasons – for the sake of palatability, the white gaze, and a chance at having her novel succeed. Instead of beginning it as she had planned with an “immediate confrontation”¹⁴², she had opted for a “gentle welcome”¹⁴³. In a later essay, she would confess, “This deference, paid to the ‘white’ gaze, was the one time I addressed the ‘problem.’ ”¹⁴⁴ Regardless, she was still able to separate herself from her predecessors, all while creating a novel that detailed the flourishing of independent Black girls, and incorporated joy onto a page that had for far too long focused on suffering.

¹⁴² Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xvi)

¹⁴³ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xvi)

¹⁴⁴ Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Vintage International, 2004). (Foreword, xv)

Conclusion

While this project has focused on literary dissent, its goals, how it pertains to the Black book, and the obstacles and successes of its usage, by the time Toni Morrison is brought into the discussion there is an obvious difference between herself and her predecessors. Writing for the white gaze was not an option for her, not because it was not imposed upon her, but because she simply did not want her writing to have its value determined by those who would never live the Black experience.

Granted that Morrison's approach to the Black book and what I have defined as literary dissent had not been as acceptable when Wright and Baldwin were writing, white publishers in the 50s and 60s had finally given Black authors permission to exhibit dissent, so long as it remained palatable and inclusive of their own perspectives. In 2021, however, that same permission is no longer needed. Though dissent has always existed, based on what has been looked at in this project, it has contemporarily extended well-beyond the Black book.

Filmmakers like Marsai Martin and Jordan Peele have made it clear that their art will exist beyond stereotypes and trauma.¹⁴⁵ ¹⁴⁶ Athletes like LeBron James, who had been told to "shut up and dribble"¹⁴⁷ after voicing his support for the Black Lives Matter protests that have been occurring since this past summer, refuse to maintain their silence to please the white

¹⁴⁵ Genie Lauren, "It's Time for Black Horror to Move beyond Trauma," Mic, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.mic.com/p/its-time-for-black-horror-to-move-beyond-trauma-73129442>.

¹⁴⁶ "Marsai Martin Has an Office Rule for Produced Projects: 'No Black Pain,'" The Grapevine, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://thegrapevine.theroot.com/marsai-martin-has-an-office-rule-for-produced-projects-1846572524>.

¹⁴⁷ Michael J. Duarte • Published June 5, 2020 • Updated on June 5, and 2020 at 6:18 Am, "LeBron James Responds to Laura Ingraham's 'Shut Up and Dribble' With Powerful Post About Police Brutality," *NBC Los Angeles* (blog), accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.nbclausangeles.com/news/sports/lebron-james-responds-to-laura-ingrahams-shut-up-and-dribble-with-powerful-post-about-police-brutality/2375333/>.

audience. What all of these individuals share is their resistance to fall into exploitation based on an overall acceptance that *all representation is not good representation*. Peele's film, *Get Out*, gave audiences an unpredictable horror film after years of predictability, all while exposing racism without having to capitalize on Black pain. Marsai, in similar footsteps to Morrison, downright refuses to engage with film projects that portray black pain, "because there's so many films and projects about that, so that's not who I am."¹⁴⁸ James, who is undoubtedly one of the greatest athletes of all time, does not allow the fear of losing viewers to deter him from voicing his support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Nevertheless, in the same way that our three authors risked being excluded from the mainstream as a consequence of their dissent, Colin Kaepernick, another renowned athlete, lost his job because he chose to kneel during the national anthem as an act of protest.¹⁴⁹

Ultimately, it is safe to say that at the present moment, dissent is *everywhere*. In the arts and in our daily lives, social media has made engaging and voicing dissent as easy as typing a post and pressing a button. But while it might be "everywhere," the same risks of ostracization still exist for those who wish to dissent, which makes me wonder, what would the response of our three authors had been if they had been told *to shut up and write*? Writing this project has been a reminder of the immense amount of work and sacrifice that were made in order for me to even be able to write on the subject of dissent. Because of the contributions of authors like Wright, Baldwin, and Morrison, we no longer have to force ourselves to try to get a seat at the table. Instead, we make our own as we see fit, even if it means taking a risk.

¹⁴⁸ "Marsai Martin Has an Office Rule for Produced Projects: 'No Black Pain,'" The Grapevine, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://thegrapevine.theroot.com/marsai-martin-has-an-office-rule-for-produced-projects-1846572524>.

¹⁴⁹ Josh Levin, "The NFL's Billionaire Owners Are Too Late to Stop Colin Kaepernick," Slate Magazine, August 18, 2017, <https://slate.com/sports/2017/08/colin-kaepernicks-protest-cost-him-his-job-but-started-a-movement.html>.

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