

Intellectual Disposition and Bodily Knowledge

Richard Wright's Literary Practice

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And then, while writing, a new and thrilling relationship would spring up under the drive of emotion, coalescing and telescoping alien facts into a known and felt truth. That was the deep fun of the job: to feel within my body that I was pushing out to new areas of feeling, strange landmarks of emotion, tramping upon foreign soil, compounding new relationships of perceptions, making new and—until that very split second of time!—unheard-of and unfelt effects with words. It had a buoying and tonic impact upon me; my senses would strain and seek for more and more of such relationships; my temperature would rise as I worked. That is writing as I feel it, a kind of significant living.

RICHARD WRIGHT, "HOW 'BIGGER' WAS BORN"

In the essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Richard Wright explains his creation of one of the great American intellectual achievements of the 20th century, his novel *Native Son*. In the above quoted passage from the essay, however, Wright does not describe his writing of the novel as an intellectual process limited to the sphere of the conceptual, conscious, and rational. Rather, he emphasizes the somatic, the emotional and sensual dimension of his writing process. Literary creation, for Wright, was a bodily experience and his great American novel is at least partly the product of a knowledge

that, drawing on a concept of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, may be called a "bodily knowledge" (cf. *Pascalian Meditations* 128-63).

The assumption that Wright was not consciously aware of all the forces that guided his creative process found psychoanalytic confirmation in Frederic Wertham's essay "An Unconscious Determinant in *Native Son*" from 1944.¹ In Wertham's "psychoanalytic study of a literary creation based on analytic study of its author" (111), he and Wright aimed to uncover the "unconscious determinant" for the creation of *Native Son*'s "key scene," meaning the scene wherein "Bigger Thomas unintentionally kills Mary Dalton in the presence of her blind mother" (112). With psychoanalytic methods, the two did bring to light a memory of Wright's adolescence that was not conscious to him while he was writing the novel, although it does bear striking resemblance to the scene of Mary Dalton's death. Wertham describes this memory, which, according to him, unconsciously provided the content of the scene:

As an adolescent of fifteen, Wright went to public school and worked mornings and evenings for a white family. [...] His chief duty was to tend the fireplace. [...] The fireplace corresponds of course to the furnace in the novel, in which the Dalton girl's body was burned. Further associative material led to the recollection of a special scene. In the early morning young Richard would carry scuttles of coal and wood in to the house. On one such morning when he was carrying out his usual routine, he opened the door and came suddenly upon the lady of the house before she had dressed. She reprimanded him severely and told him he should always knock before entering. These recollections had great emotional power. They were related to much earlier emotional experiences. (113)

Reading the quoted passages from "An Unconscious Determinant in *Native Son*" and "How 'Bigger' Was Born," one is left to wonder about the connection that may exist between the powerful emotions that Wertham here describes as being related to this uncovered memory and the emotions that Wright claims to have experienced during the writing of his novel.

1 For an account of the relationship between Wright and Wertham, see my essay "Guilty Children: Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday* and Fredric Wertham's *Dark Legend*." Wertham several times changed the spelling of his first name.

While Wertham's essay aims to explain literary creation by means of psychoanalytic methods, it does not mention the psychic process of "sublimation," although Sigmund Freud considered this process to be "intimately connected" with "artistic talent and capacity" (136). In *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, Freud defines the sexual instinct's capacity for sublimation as its "power to replace its immediate aim by other aims which may be valued more highly and which are not sexual" (78). In the attempt to explain Leonardo's "vacillation between art and science" (134) and the inhibition that scientific research tended to impose on his artistic activity, Freud distinguishes between an "original sublimation" that is related to scientific investigation and a "second sublimation" related to artistic creation (133). He assumes that Leonardo had initially begun his scientific researches "in the service of his art" (76, see also 133), so that these two kinds of sublimation are not mutually exclusive. However, Freud sees them as arising from different origins. According to him, Leonardo's scientific researches developed from the "*infantile sexual researches*" (78, original emphasis) directed to the question of the origin of children. In Leonardo's case, libido then evaded the nascent sexual repression of early childhood "by being sublimated from the very beginning into curiosity and by becoming attached to the powerful instinct for research as a reinforcement" (80). Simultaneously, sexual repression was "still taken into account by the instinct, in that it avoid[ed] any concern with sexual themes" (80), so that it could be directed to scientific investigations more broadly. While Freud, therefore, can derive Leonardo's later scientific interests from his infantile sexual researches, redirected to non-sexual investigations through repression and reinforced through sublimation, the origin of artistic activity remains much more obscure to him: "We should be most glad to give an account of the way in which artistic activity derives from the primal instincts of the mind if it were not just here that our capacities fail us." (132) And while sublimation made an essential contribution to Leonardo's artistic and scientific achievements, Freud concedes that Leonardo's "extraordinary capacity for sublimating the primitive instincts" (136) remains inexplicable to psychoanalysis: "Instincts and their transformations are at the limit of what is discernible by psycho-analysis. From that point it gives place to biological research." (136) The question of the transformation of the sexual instinct was also raised by Bourdieu, who claims that "[o]ne of the tasks of sociology is to determine how the social world constitutes the biological

libido, an undifferentiated impulse, as a specific social libido. [...] [T]he work of socialization of the libido is precisely what transforms impulses into specific interests” (*Practical Reason* 78-79).

When Freud’s assumption that artistic creation is intimately connected with the psychic process of sublimation is taken into account, then Wertham’s psychoanalytic explanation of Wright’s creation of the key scene of *Native Son* can be considered incomplete. In Wright’s creative process, the unconscious memory that according to Wertham provided the content for this scene and the process of sublimation both played a part. An explanation of Wright’s creative process, therefore, must account for the relationship that existed in the writing of the key scene of *Native Son* between his memory and sublimation. This essay will try to offer this explanation through a relational-sociological reconstruction of the generative, structuring principle of *Native Son*’s key scene, a reconstruction that, in the end, will try to integrate the psychoanalytic insights that, first, the unconscious memory of Wright’s adolescence provided the material for the scene and that, second, the process of sublimation is intimately connected with artistic production. While the memory that Wertham uncovered is of specific interest to a study of Wright, the concept of sublimation is of interest to the theory of practice more broadly because, like no established concept of this theory, it accounts for the socialization of the libido, for its transformation from “biological” into “social libido.”²

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- 2 Bourdieu’s own uses of the concept of sublimation exemplify the relationship between his theory of practice and psychoanalysis. The concept already makes an appearance in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, in a passage that precedes a critique of psychoanalysis (cf. 92), and it makes fleeting reappearances in most of his major publications. Only some of Bourdieu’s uses of the term adhere to a psychoanalytic conception of sublimation, which itself underwent slight transformations throughout the development of Freud’s thought. Although Bourdieu frequently borrowed psychoanalytic terminology, he never explicated the relationship between his theory and psychoanalysis, and the closest he came to a systematic integration of the concept of sublimation into his theory is a passage on “Censorship and the Field of Scientific Sublimation” in *Pascalian Meditations* (111-14). Partly due to the lack of a systematic rapprochement of the two disciplines even the question if Bourdieu’s borrowings from psychoanalysis are

WRIGHT'S EARLY SOCIAL TRAJECTORY

In *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Bourdieu translated his theory of practice into the methodology of his “Science of Works of Art” (cf. 175-282). In this study he offers a concise rendition of the basic assumption of his theory: “[T]he practices of writers and artists, starting with their works, are the product of the meeting of two histories, the history of the production of the position occupied [in the literary and artistic field] and the history of the production of the dispositions of its occupants” (256). The dispositions of authors are inscribed into their habitus throughout their social trajectory, which Bourdieu defines as “the *series of positions* successively occupied by the same agent or the same group of agents in successive spaces” (258, original emphasis). According to Bourdieu, the authors central to his study had comparable social trajectories since they were what he calls “inheritors” (83). For Bourdieu, it is “money (inherited) that guarantees freedom with respect to money” (84), and the inheritors were, through the familial relations into which they were born, “equally endowed with economic and cultural capital” (86). In contrast to the subjects of Bourdieu’s study, it is commonly accepted about Wright that he was not an inheritor. In a typical description of his early childhood and youth, Kenneth Kinnamon lists the many obstacles Wright had to overcome in order to pursue a literary career: “the physical hunger and malnutrition” that he suffered due to his family’s poverty, his lack of “formal education” and the indifference of “his environment [...] to creative intellectual activity,” the fact that his father, “an illiterate Mississippi sharecropper,” had “abandoned his wife and two sons in a penniless condition,” and his “racial status” as a black man in the Jim Crow South (4). Acknowledging the emphasis that Bourdieu places on early experiences in the formation of habitus, Kinnamon’s summary makes it appear inexplicable that Richard, born in Mississippi in 1908 as the grandson of four slaves (cf. Fabre 1), became Wright, one of the greatest authors of the 20th century. But when it is assumed, again with Bourdieu, that the dispositions of habitus are the result of the incorporation of social structures and that they include a sense for the limitations inscribed into the structures that they incorporate, so that they

coherent with his theory of practice or introduce inherent contradictions into it cannot generally be answered.

are incapable of generating practices that lie beyond these limitations, then Wright's acquisition of the dispositions that enabled his literary achievements must have been inscribed as a potentiality into the social structure that structured his habitus. Since Wright was born disinherited, the process wherein he acquired these dispositions and the ownership of the cultural capital that allowed him to enter the field of cultural production poses the greatest problem for analysis. In his autobiography, first published in 1945 as *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, but only posthumously published in its entirety as *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, Wright rendered the structural reasons for his acquisition of a literary disposition either under the veil of symbolism or in textual margins. In order to reconstruct Wright's early social trajectory, therefore, the autobiography's symbolic passages must be unveiled and its margins drawn into the center of the analysis.

In autobiographical and biographical materials on Wright, three members of his family, his father Nathan Wright, his mother Ella Wright, and his maternal grandmother Margaret Wilson, appear as the most important forces in his upbringing; the positions that they occupied in the field of the Wright family were the most distinct positions therein. All available accounts describe Nathan Wright as a poor and illiterate day laborer, who held odd jobs and worked for most of his life as a sharecropper (cf. Fabre 1-2, 6-7). He apparently abandoned his wife and their two children, Richard and his younger brother Leon Allan, relatively early in Wright's life, thus aggravating their already precarious economic situation. The breakup of Wright's parents, the fact that he stayed with his mother and was left by his father, largely removed him from the influence of the latter. While Nathan Wright, who had occupied a position of economic and cultural disinheritance in the field of the family, very early recedes into the background of the narrative Wright offers in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, his maternal grandmother begins to take a more prominent role therein. The importance that she assumed for the maintenance of Ella Wright and her children strengthened her position in the field of the family and turned her into a potential role model for her grandson. Wright represents Margaret Wilson and her husband, his maternal grandfather Richard Wilson, as illiterate, too (cf. *Black Boy* 83, 133-34). Through their illiteracy and poverty, the positions that they held in the field of the family were close to the one that, previously, his father had occupied, so that they themselves were hardly able to

incite an intellectual inclination in Wright. This inclination first appears in one of the symbolically laden scenes of his autobiography. Wright writes: "To help support the household my grandmother boarded a colored schoolteacher, Ella, a young woman with so remote and dreamy and silent a manner that I was as much afraid of her as I was attracted to her." (38) Wright convinced the schoolteacher to narrate to him what she was reading, "*Bluebeard and His Seven Wives*" (38), and then states that "Ella's whispered story of deception and murder had been the first experience in my life that had elicited from me a total emotional response" (40). This scene is symbolic because it conceals, under the veil of the representation of a singular moment of intellectual awakening, the permanent structural factors in the field of Wright's childhood family that facilitated his acquisition of cultural capital and an intellectual disposition.

In his biography of Wright, Michel Fabre, without giving a source, identifies the young schoolteacher who tells the story of Bluebeard to Wright as "Eloise Crawford" (18). Wright, however, decided to give her the name of his mother, which his autobiography identifies as Ella only long after the episode with the schoolteacher (cf. *Black Boy* 83), and he emphasized a further similarity between the two women. Apparently Wright's maternal grandparents had, despite their own relative poverty in cultural capital, secured for their children a relatively high degree of education, and Fabre characterizes the relationship between the Wilson and Wright families as conflicted due to a discrepancy in their respective social standings: "Ella Wilson's family considered her marriage to an illiterate laborer a step down. Despite this disapproval Ella, who was teaching in Cranfield at the time, accepted Nathan Wright shortly after their first meeting." (6) Wright, in his autobiography, mentions that several of his uncles and aunts worked as teachers, either in religious or country schools (cf. *Black Boy* 99-100, 149). But he does not mention what Fabre here points out, namely, that his own mother was a schoolteacher, too. While Wright repeatedly mentions the menial work that his mother conducted after she had to abandon teaching shortly after his birth (cf. Fabre 14), for example her "cook[ing] in the kitchens of white folks" (*Black Boy* 59), he leaves out of his autobiography any explicit reference to her previous scholastic profession. But he renders this profession symbolically in the figure of Ella, the young woman who boards with his grandmother. Just like this Ella, Ella Wright was a "colored schoolteacher." The young woman in *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) who

awakens Wright's literary interests through a rendition of the story of Bluebeard is a composite figure that condenses Eloise Crawford and Ella Wright, so that she represents, in a veiled form, the influence that his mother's teachings had on Wright. This symbolic rendition of the fact that Ella Wright did socially inherit an intellectual disposition to her son is made explicit in other passages of *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, which, however, marginalize her intellectual influence on him, frequently by rendering it in subordinate clauses. For example, after Wright describes how, prior to his entry into school, he questioned some local schoolchildren about the "baffling black print" (23) in their books, he writes: "When I had learned to recognize certain words, I told my mother that I wanted to learn to read and she encouraged me. Soon I was able to pick my way through most of the children's books I ran across." (23) Later Wright even states about his mother: "[S]he taught me to read, told me stories. On Sundays I would read the newspapers with my mother guiding me and spelling out the words." (24) These passages indicate that, even before he entered school, Wright had learned how to learn from his mother and, after having learned how to learn, had learned to read and write from her. Accordingly, Wright's meager formal school education was merely of secondary importance for his acquisition of an intellectual disposition and cultural capital, because his primary education was supplied by a private teacher: his mother. Wright was an autodidact insofar as the term signifies that his learning was not primarily derived from the school system of the American South; but he was an autodidact only insofar as the term does not signify what he himself in his autobiography calls his "self-achieved literacy" (352). The "auto" of his didacticism signifies that his intellectualism was less derived from his relationship to the educational system than from his relationship to his mother.

In contrast to Wright's marginalization of the intellectual influence that his mother exerted on him, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* strongly emphasizes the impediments that his family's great economic poverty and its dominated position in the racial order of the Jim Crow South set to his education. These impediments did not merely exist simultaneously to Wright's acquisition of an intellectual disposition, but in opposition to it. Wright repeatedly mentions that his family's economic poverty hindered his education, for example because he "began school [...] at a later age than was usual; my mother had not been able to buy me the necessary clothes to

make me presentable” (25). With regard to the year 1920, when he was about twelve years old, Wright states: “I had had but one year of unbroken study; with the exception of one year at the church school, each time I had begun a school term something happened to disrupt it. [...] Though I was not aware of it, the next four years were to be the only opportunity for formal study in my life.” (117) Wright writes about the year 1924, when he was sixteen: “School opened and, though I had not prepared myself, I enrolled. The school was far across town and the walking distance alone consumed my breakfast of mush and lard gravy. I attended classes without books for a month, then got a job working mornings and evenings for three dollars a week.” (156) As these quotes suggest, his family’s poverty hindered Wright’s attendance of school because it prevented the purchase of the necessary materials and because it forced him to spend his time wage-laboring instead of learning and attending school.

The limitations imposed on Wright by the symbolic order of the segregated South are, in an even more condensed form than in *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*), described in “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch.” It is his sense for these limitations which Wright calls the “ethics” of Jim Crow, and they are imparted to him through the physical violence that he suffers, witnesses, or is threatened with. This violence is executed by various white men or even Wright’s mother herself. After a fight between his childhood gang and a group of white boys, Wright seeks his mother’s understanding and receives a beating:

She grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two. She would smack my rump with the stave, and, while the skin was still smarting, impart to me gems of Jim Crow wisdom. [...] I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight *white* folks again. [...] She finished by telling me that I ought to be thankful to God as long as I lived that they didn’t kill me. (226, original emphasis)

In Wright’s representation, the landscape where the fight with the white boys had taken place becomes an internalized symbol that reminds him of the ethics of Jim Crow and that is connected to the feeling of fear: “Even today when I think of white folks, the hard, sharp outlines of white houses surrounded by trees, lawns, and hedges are present somewhere in the background of my mind. Through the years they grew into an overarching

symbol of fear.” (226) Among the many limits that this autobiographical sketch depicts as protected by the ethics of Jim Crow are those set to Wright’s education and those set to relationships between black men and white women. Wright reveals the tricks that he had to devise in order to receive books from a segregated library (cf. 235), and he tells how he was reprimanded for looking at a naked “snowy-skinned blonde” (233) prostitute by her white customer: ““Keep your eyes where they belong, if you want to be healthy!”” (233). What Wright himself calls his internalization of a “symbol of fear” is captured in Bourdieu’s theory under the concept of symbolic violence. For Bourdieu, in symbolic violence “the magical frontier between the dominant and the dominated” is practically accepted by the dominated in “the form of *bodily emotion* (shame, timidity, anxiety, guilt)” (*Pascalian Meditations* 169, original emphasis). But these bodily effects are only experienced in a present situation of potential symbolic domination when the disposition to undergo them was previously and permanently inscribed into the habitus of the symbolically dominated. The present situation then “reawakens and reactivates” (169) this incorporated disposition, including the constraints that it reproduces, in the form of bodily emotions. In Bourdieu’s terminology, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” shows how the disposition to undergo the effects of the symbolic violence that protected the frontiers drawn by segregation was inculcated in Wright.

Wright’s habitus, then, was structured by a structural opposition that existed in the field of his childhood family. In the position of Wright’s mother, who was distinguished from his illiterate father and grandmother through her possession of a relatively high degree of cultural capital, intellectualism was inscribed as a potentiality for Wright into the structure of this field. Motivated by the recognition that his mother granted for early intellectual successes, he modeled his position in the family according to the one that she held therein, so that he acquired an intellectual disposition and cultural capital from her. However, Wright’s attempts to realize this disposition were consistently opposed during his childhood and youth by the social necessities inscribed into the field of the family through economic poverty and Jim Crow segregation. In contrast to inheritors, who are able to convert inherited economic capital into the leisure time necessary for intellectual work, Wright, disinherited, had to use time that he could have invested into leisurely intellectual labor in order to perform the menial subsistence labor through which he contributed to his family’s survival. In

addition, he incorporated the limitations that were set to his education by Jim Crow segregation in the form of the disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence. This latter disposition Wright had also largely inherited from his mother, who, out of fear for his physical integrity, served as a mediator for the symbolic order of the South. This oppositional structure, constituted, on the one hand, by the mother's relative intellectual distinction and, on the other, by the social urgencies imposed on the family through poverty and racism, structured Wright's habitus. Accordingly, Wright had an oppositional habitus: He had socially inherited an intellectual disposition, but the limitations that opposed his acquisition and realization of this disposition were also inscribed into his habitus. This opposition, ultimately derived from the position of the family in the social space of the American South, was the structured structure of Wright's habitus, which, in turn, was the structuring structure of dispositions that contributed to his practices, including his literary practice.³

3 In his *Sketch for a Self-Analysis* Bourdieu states that he himself had a “*cleft habitus*, inhabited by tensions and contradictions” (original emphasis) that resulted from the “very strong discrepancy between high academic consecration and low social origin” (100). While Wright, too, may have had a “cleft habitus” as the result of the discrepancy between his “low” social origin, wherein his primary habitus was formed, and his later “high” literary consecration, the opposition that existed in his habitus, described above as an oppositional habitus, differs from the contradictions that Bourdieu's concept of the cleft habitus describes. Bourdieu's concept emphasizes a discrepancy between the field of primary socialization and the field wherein, after this primary socialization, the habitus is situated. The opposition that was inscribed into Wright's habitus, in contrast, developed from an opposition that already existed in the field of primary socialization, and it was reinforced by rather than derived from an opposition that existed between the fields that he moved through successively. However, the two forms of habitus, cleft habitus and oppositional habitus, do not mutually exclude each other and they probably describe two interdependent aspects of one and the same phenomenon, namely the phenomenon that the upward social movement that both, Wright and Bourdieu, underwent usually entails internal tensions, contradictions, insecurities, and anxieties.

WRIGHT'S POSITION IN THE LITERARY FIELD OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

In 1940 Wright published a joint review of two autobiographies that came out in that year, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* by Langston Hughes and *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* by W. E. B. Du Bois. This review allows to hint at the position that Wright, in the year of the publication of *Native Son*, occupied in the literary field. Wright writes that the two books “reflect class divisions within the area of Negro experience” (“As Richard Wright Sees” 215), meaning a division between the “educated Negro” and “the masses of workers” (216). While, according to Wright, Du Bois “still clings to the hope of a ‘talented tenth’ leading and guiding the masses of the Negro people” (215), Hughes “looks to the masses of the people for hope and guidance. He feels that they are best fitted to protect and extend the basic values of our civilization and he has cast his hope with them in their struggles toward enlightenment and organization.” (215) Hughes and Du Bois represent two opposed established positions that were open to authors in the literary field constituted by the Harlem Renaissance, a field that both had shaped substantially.⁴ Du Bois’s academic intellectualism included the political assumption that social change would emanate from the leadership of a “talented tenth,” that is, the intellectual and cultural elite, which would uplift the masses through its guidance. In contrast, Hughes’s folkloristic or proletarian intellectualism included the political assumption that social change would emanate from the masses, who in a revolutionary act would overthrow the elite.

Since Wright’s entrance into the literary field was tied to the Communist Party and the possibilities for publication that it offered to him, his initial position in the field was close to the one that his review ascribes to

4 Describing the Harlem Renaissance as a literary field follows George Hutchinson who writes about it in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*: “The movement represented the emergence of a literary sector or field; what becomes important is not individual author-by-author succession but the tension between a variety of possible (and overlapping) positions.” (436) While Hutchinson’s study draws on Bourdieu’s notion of field, it falls short of a relational account because it neglects its interdependent concept of habitus.

Hughes. So in his first poetological publication, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” from 1937, Wright claims that “there can be no doubt” that “Negro workers” possess “consciousness and mobility for economic and political action” (38). However, in retrospect Wright writes in *Black Boy (American Hunger)* about the time of the onset of the Great Depression, when he was working as an insurance agent in Chicago and first came into contact with the organized political left:

As I went from house to house collecting money, I saw black men mounted upon soapboxes at street corners, bellowing about bread, rights, and revolution. I liked their courage, but I doubted their wisdom. The speakers claimed that Negroes were angry, that they were about to rise and join their white fellow workers to make a revolution. I was in and out of many Negro homes each day and I knew that the Negroes were lost, ignorant, sick in mind and body. I saw that a vast distance separated the agitators from the masses, a distance so vast that the agitators did not know how to appeal to the people they sought to lead. (280)

No word here of the “consciousness and mobility for economic and political action” among the “Negro workers.” As Wright began to perceive this “vast distance” between the Communists’ intellectual conception of the masses and the reality of the life of the masses, he began to move away from the position he had espoused in his “Blueprint.” Since the distance between Communist intellectuals and masses was structurally homologous to the opposition between intellectualism and social necessity that structured his habitus, Wright was predisposed to recognize that the intellectuals’ assumption of the revolutionary potential of the masses was the result of an idealist projection, rather than an accurate description of the state of the masses. However, Wright’s rejection of his initial position in the literary field could not lead him to a position like the one that his review ascribes to the distinguished academic Du Bois. As an autodidact intellectual, Wright possessed a high degree of incorporated cultural capital and this capital allowed him to enter the intellectual field. But he did not possess the institutional cultural capital, the degrees that are a requirement for access to academic institutions. Wright, who, as he himself had pointed out, had only received four years of uninterrupted formal education, was excluded from the central positions in the intellectual field that are situated in its academic subfield and reserved for holders of institutional cultural capital, like

Du Bois. Wright, moving away from a position similar to Hughes's and structurally excluded from Du Bois's, took a position of suspense in the literary field. This position was suspenseful because it was situated between the two opposed established positions of the Harlem Renaissance, the folkloristic or proletarian intellectualism represented by Hughes and the academic intellectualism represented by Du Bois, as it rejected them both. The meeting of Wright's oppositional habitus and his position of suspense between the two sides of an opposition that was running through the literary field was the structuring principle of Wright's literary practice in 1940 – and thus the structuring principle of *Native Son*.

Wright's initial position in the literary field had imposed relatively strong constraints on the expression of his oppositional dispositions because the intellectual standpoint of the Communist Party, which it required him to reproduce, inhibited the expression of the social urgencies that were inscribed into his habitus. In contrast, the position of suspense that he took in the field when writing *Native Son* allowed his oppositional habitual dispositions rather free expression because it had a higher degree of correspondence with the structure of his habitus. It was Wright's move away from the position he had taken in his "Blueprint" that allowed him to offer in Bigger Thomas his intellectual representation of a member of the masses who does not possess the "consciousness and mobility for economic and political action" that he had ascribed to "Negro workers" in this essay, but rather is "lost, ignorant, sick in mind and body," as he characterized "Negro workers" in his autobiography. While Du Bois's position would have precluded the depiction of such a character who is unresponsive to intellectualism and who does not follow an uplifting trajectory, Hughes's position would have precluded the depiction of a character who is not salvaged either through his participation in folk culture or by the possession of a revolutionary consciousness. Wright's intellectual representation of Bigger's sickness in mind and body finds its culmination in the key scene of *Native Son*, a scene generated and structured by the tensions that guided its author's literary practice.

WRIGHT'S LITERARY PRACTICE

On the basis of Wertham's "An Unconscious Determinant in *Native Son*" and Freud's book on Leonardo it was earlier assumed that the process of the creation of *Native Son*'s key scene included two elements: first, the unconscious memory of Wright's adolescence as it provided the content for the scene and, second, the process of sublimation as it is intimately connected with artistic creation in general. These two elements correspond to the two opposed dispositions incorporated in Wright's habitus and, therefore, to the tension that guided his literary practice during the creation of *Native Son*. Wright had socially inherited an intellectual disposition, but throughout his early trajectory the realization of this disposition was impeded by the poverty-imposed necessity to perform menial subsistence labor and by the limitations imposed on it by racial segregation, which had been inculcated in Wright as the disposition to undergo the bodily effects of symbolic violence when overstepping the frontiers drawn by Jim Crow. The memory of Wright's adolescence captures both of these impediments to his acquisition and realization of an intellectual disposition. It shows him performing the menial subsistence labor that stood in structural opposition to his intellectual leisurely labor and it shows him suffering from the effects of the symbolic violence that protected the racial order of the South. In the uncovered memory Wright involuntarily came upon the undressed white lady of the house in which he was employed and, thus, transgressed the borderline that protected white female nudity from the black male gaze and separated white female sexuality from black male sexuality. This transgression, for Wright, had great emotional power as it reawakened and reactivated his disposition to suffer from the bodily effects of symbolic violence when challenging the dominant order of Jim Crow. His emotionally powerful recollections were, as Wertham claimed, "related to much earlier emotional experiences" because they stood in a causal connection to the many situations wherein the disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence was inculcated in Wright through physical violence and its threats. The uncovered memory, then, does not only capture one isolated incident. Rather, this one incident synecdochically represents the social necessities that Wright had incorporated into the structure of his habitus. In particular, the memory of Wright's adolescence that provided the content of *Native*

Son's key scene represents his structured, structuring disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence.

In addition to this disposition, Wright had socially inherited an intellectual disposition and this inheritance involved the process of sublimation, as it describes the replacement of the immediate aim of the sexual instinct by another aim which is not sexual. In Wright's relationship to his mother his biological libido was socialized and transformed into a specific social interest. This transformation appears in even greater relief when relational sociology makes a concession to orthodox psychoanalysis and allows for the hypothesis that Wright's relationship to his mother entailed an incestuous desire on the part of the son. The libido that was related to the incestuous desire but could not be discharged sexually, then, found a sublimated outlet in the intellectual relationship to the mother, and Wright's intellectual desire developed a special intensity precisely because it was reinforced by the libido that was originally related to the incestuous desire for his teacher. Even then what was formative for Wright was not primarily the mother's position in an oedipal triangle but rather her position in social space, in particular her possession of the relatively high degree of cultural capital that allowed her to become a teacher to her son. Irrespective of the hypothetical incestuous dimension of their relationship, it was through the mediation of his mother's teachings that Wright's biological libido was transformed into an intellectual interest that ultimately turned into a habitual intellectual disposition. The specific form wherein Wright realized his intellectual disposition finds its origin neither in infantile sexual researches nor in other primal instincts of the mind, but rather in his social trajectory. Due to the limitations imposed on his access to institutional cultural capital, Wright was excluded from the academic or scientific field. Accordingly, he did not have the choice to vacillate between science and art, and his scientific interests, for example in psychoanalysis, were condemned to exist in the service of his literature.⁵ Wright's relationship to his mother, which mediated the sublimation of his libido into a habitual intellectual disposition, was later reproduced in his relationship to the literary field. His intellectual disposition made use of and was reinforced by biological libido and it found its

5 For an investigation of Wright's literary adaptations of psychoanalytic theories, themes, and tropes, see my dissertation "The Novels of Crude Psychology: Richard Wright, Fredric Wertham, and the Twofold Truth of Literary Practice."

realization in his literary practice. Wright's possession of an intellectual disposition, acquired and reinforced through sublimation, is the necessary condition for his literary creativity and, therefore, intimately connected with his writings in general, including his writing of the key scene of *Native Son*.⁶

Wright's literary practice exemplifies a process that in the following will be called dispositional sublimation. In his creation of the key scene of *Native Son*, both of Wright's two opposed habitual dispositions were simultaneously awakened, with the result that his intellectual disposition enabled him to sublimate his disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence. The concept of dispositional sublimation describes the process wherein the intellectual disposition is combined with the disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence, so that, in their simultaneous realization, the latter disposition itself becomes part of the creative process and the bodily emotions related to it, as they contribute to and guide the writing, are effectively inscribed into the text. The assumption that while writing *Native Son* Wright's intellectual disposition entered into an intimate connection with his disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence is supported by a stylistic homology that exists between the description of his creative process in "How 'Bigger' Was Born" and his description of his incorporation of the ethics of Jim Crow: In "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Wright illustrates his mother's inculcation in him of the disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence by claiming that she beat him until he "had a fever of one hundred and two"; in the above-quoted passage from

6 Norbert Elias makes the most systematic one of his rare mentions of the concept of sublimation in *Mozart: The Sociology of a Genius*. Before describing Mozart's "musical education" (103) by his father, himself "a gifted musician of the middle rank" and "a man with a pronounced pedagogic tendency" (102), Elias writes: "Among the factors which clearly influence the process of sublimation are the extent and direction of sublimation in a child's parents, or in other adults with whom the child has close contact in early life. Later, too, models of sublimation, such as suitable teachers, can exert a decisive influence through their personalities. Furthermore, one often has the impression that a person's position in the chain of generations has a special influence on the likelihood of sublimation; in other words, sublimation is easier for people in the second or third generation." (102)

“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright declares that during his creation of *Native Son* his “temperature would rise.” It may be doubtful whether Wright’s mother actually achieved to beat him into a fever and whether he actually wrote himself into a fever. But this textual homology suggests that the bodily reactions related to Wright’s habitual disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence were connected to the somatic experience he claims to have had during his writing of *Native Son*. In the process of creation Wright’s disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence was activated, but combined with his intellectual disposition. Through dispositional sublimation, the suffering induced by the former disposition and the pleasure derived from the creation enabled by the latter disposition were combined and, in their combination, both transformed. Thereby they generated a specific structure of the linguistic sign, inscribing into the key scene of *Native Son* not only Wright’s intellectual but also his bodily knowledge.

Wright’s intellectual representation of Bigger Thomas’s suffering from the bodily effects of symbolic violence inscribed into the key scene of *Native Son* the very disposition that, throughout his social trajectory, had opposed his acquisition and realization of the intellectual disposition that was realized in the very process of his creation of the text. The great emotional power related to Wright’s disposition to undergo the bodily effects of symbolic violence finds entrance into the scene through the emotions that Bigger Thomas experiences when he fears to be detected in the bedroom of Mary Dalton, emotions referred to by signifiers like “excitement and fear,” “hysterical terror,” or “[f]renzy” (*Native Son* 523-25). While realizing his intellectual disposition and typing the signifiers that constitute the literary language of the scene, Wright’s dormant disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence was activated, but partly displaced, as it passed from a bodily to a textual state. The disposition that was actualized in the unconscious memory of Wright’s adolescence in the form of a bodily emotion was disembodied and implemented textually, so that Wright’s bodily disposition is signified by Bigger Thomas’s emotions. Accordingly, in Wright’s literary language, signifiers do not merely refer to signified concepts. Rather, while they refer to Wright’s conceptual knowledge of the urgencies that Bigger Thomas suffers from, they, in addition, begin to refer to his bodily knowledge of these urgencies, to his incorporated disposition to suffer from the bodily effects that symbolic violence induces. Wright’s literary practice, then, inserted a second signified into the structure of the sign; the

signifiers of his literary language refer to his conceptual and to his bodily knowledge. As Wright's bodily knowledge becomes a part of the structure of the sign, his bodily emotions are effectively inscribed into the text, so that they constitute therein a second layer of signification that is interdependent but not identical with its conceptual dimension. This second layer of signification – that is, the bodily meaning inscribed into the text through the bodily dimension of Wright's use of the sign – accounts for the key scene's uncanny capacity to evoke in disposed readers the very same emotions that the main character is experiencing. Wright's bodily writing allows for an equally bodily reading of his text, a reading that, however, has as its necessary condition the reader's own incorporated disposition to undergo the effects of symbolic violence, in particular as they relate to the ongoing histories of racism and capitalism, the two major forces in the structuring of the bodily disposition that Wright inscribed into his text. Through the specific structure of the sign that dispositional sublimation engendered, through the reference that it established between the signifiers of his literary language and their second signified, his bodily knowledge, Wright inscribed into the key scene of his great American novel the very sense-straining tension that guided his literary practice. As this practice was the result of the meeting of his oppositional habitus and his suspenseful position in the literary field, it seems at any rate as if only a man who had had Wright's social trajectory could have written *Native Son* and its key scene.

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