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Structural racism and its psychological and social consequences in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of structural racism and its psychological and social consequences in Richard Wright's Native Son (1940) through the lens of African American literary criticism. An interdisciplinary framework integrating historical, socio-cultural, political, economic, and psychological perspectives situates the novel within the context of the Great Depression and the Great Migration. Instead of treating racism as a background condition, this study conceptualizes it as a structural system that operates through institutions such as housing, education, employment, and the legal system while simultaneously shaping individual consciousness and social behavior. The analysis demonstrates how racial segregation, economic deprivation, and social exclusion constrain individual agency and contribute to feelings of inferiority, hopelessness, alienation, and criminalized resistance, as embodied by the protagonist, Bigger Thomas. The study argues that Wright's novel exposes racism as a structural force that deforms both personal identity and social relations, challenging dominant narratives of individual responsibility and moral failure.

Keywords: African American literary criticism; racism; Native Son; Richard Wright; Great Depression

INTRODUCTION

African Americans or Black Americans constitute a minority group in the United States whose historical experience has been shaped by sustained and systemic racial oppression. As Yetman (1997: 284) observes, no other minority group has endured discrimination comparable in intensity, scope, and duration. Racism, in this context, operates as a structure of unequal power relations produced through the socio-political dominance of one racial group over another, manifesting in practices such as segregation, subordination, and persecution (Tyson, 2006: 360). Constructed through phenotypical difference and a legacy of enslavement that produced enduring racial fears and prejudices, racial ideology positioned Black Americans at the lowest level of the social hierarchy, described by Scruggs as "the depth below the depth" (in Huggins et al., 1971: 70). For approximately the first two and a half centuries of their presence in the United States, African Americans were defined primarily as enslaved property and systematically denied civil rights. Unlike enslaved populations in many other

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societies, they experienced legal bondage alongside racialized discrimination (Yetman, 1997: 285).

The formal abolition of slavery through the Thirteenth Amendment, followed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, did not end racial domination. Black Americans seeking freedom and opportunity continued to face intimidation, racial violence, and lynching. To reinforced white supremacy, Southern legislatures enacted segregationist policies known as the Jim Crow laws, designed to exclude Black citizens from political participation, economic advancement, and social mobility. This racial order was legally sanctioned by the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which upheld the doctrine of "separate but equal" and institutionalized segregation across American society. As Hacker (2003: 12) argues, this system structured American society into a racial divide so deeply embedded that it functioned as "two separate nations," surpassing other forms of social division, including gender, in both intensity and consequence.

In the early twentieth century, escalating racial violence and limited economic opportunities in the South prompted the Great Migration, during which millions of Black Americans relocated to northern urban centers. Although the North lacked formal Jim Crow laws, racial inequality persisted through systemic and institutionalized discrimination in housing, education, employment, and the legal system, producing patterns of segregation and exclusion that, while less overt, were no less consequential than those of the South (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Desmond, 2016; Drake & Cayton, 1945; Massey & Denton, 1993; Myrdal, 1944; Rothstein, 2017). Segregation in northern cities was maintained through restrictive covenants, discriminatory lending practices, and informal social norms rather than explicit legislation. As a result, Black migrants were relegated to racially segregated urban neighborhoods, commonly known as ghettos or the Black Belt in cities such as Chicago. In the American context, the ghetto came to signify enforced residential confinement and the systematic restriction of individual choice based on skin color (Clark, 1965; Massey & Denton, 1993). These neighborhoods were overcrowded, under-resourced, and spatially isolated, producing conditions that fostered social alienation, psychological distress, and, at times, collective unrest (Sharkey, 2013).

Economic exclusion further reinforced racial inequality in northern cities. Limited access to quality education and vocational training confined many Black Americans to low-wage, unstable, and physically demanding jobs. Discriminatory hiring practices, exclusion from trade unions, and restricted opportunities for advancement ensured their concentration at the lowest levels of the occupational hierarchy, a pattern that persists as Black workers remain overrepresented in low-wage, precarious jobs and underrepresented in higher-paying occupations (Drake & Cayton, 1945; Lu & Leicht, 2025; Wilson, 2012). These structural disadvantages were exacerbated by the Great Depression, which intensified competition for employment and public resources.

Although the economic collapse affected all Americans, Black communities suffered disproportionately due to their already precarious position in segregated labor and housing markets. Racial hostility intensified as white Americans sought to protect access to scarce jobs and relief (Katznelson, 2005; Myrdal, 1944; Wilson, 2012), while aid distribution often prioritized white recipients (Greenberg, 2009).

Racism has long been a central concern in American literature, particularly within African American literary traditions that emphasize the historical experiences, cultural identities, and social struggles of Black Americans. This body of literature critically interrogates dominant narratives of freedom and equality by exposing the contradiction between American ideals of equality and the realities of racial discrimination. A central figure in this tradition is Richard Wright, a major twentieth-century African American writer whose diverse body of work, encompassing fiction, autobiography, social history, and political commentary, offers a powerful critique of racial oppression and structural inequality.

Born in Mississippi, a region marked by long-standing segregation and racial violence, Wright's early life was profoundly shaped by Southern racism. Like many Black Americans during the Great Migration, he relocated with his family to Chicago in search of greater opportunity and relief from racial oppression. Although he lacked formal higher education, Wright developed intellectually through extensive self-education and political engagement, particularly his involvement with the Communist Party, which influenced his critique of capitalism and racial injustice. His writing employs a naturalist aesthetic that emphasizes the deterministic effects of environment, poverty, and racial oppression. As Tyson (2006: 387) notes, Wright believed that only an uncompromising realism could adequately represent the brutality of racism and its psychological consequences. This commitment is fully articulated in *Native Son* (1940), one of Richard Wright's influential novels, which examines how racialized social structures shape identity, consciousness, and violence within an urban Northern context.

Set in Chicago during the Great Depression, *Native Son* depicts the intensified suffering of Black Americans amid economic collapse and racial segregation. The novel centers on Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old Black man whose life is circumscribed by fear, poverty, and racial confinement. After the accidental killing of Mary Dalton, the white daughter of his employer, bigger attempts to avoid detection, triggering an intense police manhunt. He is ultimately captured, tried, and sentenced to death, an outcome that exposes the criminalization of Black existence and the violent consequences of systemic racism.

Since its publication, *Native Son* has generated extensive critical scholarship. Scholars have approached the novel from naturalist, Marxist, existentialist, and sociological perspectives, frequently interpreting Bigger Thomas as a figure shaped by social

determinism and racial oppression (Baldwin, 1955; Ellison, 1964; Fabre, 1973; Howe, 1963). Critics have also emphasized Wright's use of naturalist aesthetics to depict the formative power of environment and poverty, as well as the novel's critique of American capitalism and racial ideology during the Great Depression (Bell, 1987; Butler, 1991). Other studies focus on violence, criminality, and the construction of the Black male as a racialized threat within white supremacist discourse (Kinnamon, 1972).

Despite extensive scholarship on *Native Son*, relatively little attention has been paid to a systematic analysis that integrates institutional racism with its psychological and social consequences in Northern Black urban life using African American literary criticism as a unified framework. Existing studies often privilege either social determinism, ideology, or individual pathology. This study advances the discussion by examining how structural racism functions simultaneously at institutional and psychological levels, shaping both material conditions and subjective experience. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the article reframes *Native Son* not as a narrative of individual moral failure, but as a sustained critique of a racial system that produces fear, alienation, despair, and criminalized resistance as socially conditioned outcomes. By linking institutional racism to psychological formation within a single analytical framework, this study offers a systematic reinterpretation of *Native Son* as a critique of racial domination in Northern urban America.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs African American literary criticism as the primary theoretical framework for analyzing Native Son by Richard Wright. This critical approach positions race as a central analytic category, emphasizing racial identity, cultural traditions, psychological formation, and political experience on the premise that race profoundly shapes both individual consciousness and collective life in the United States and, by extension, its literary production. As Tyson (2006: 394) argues, African American criticism is particularly concerned with how race structures narrative representation, thematic development, and character formation. Within this framework, this study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates historical, socio-cultural, political, economic, and psychological dimensions to examine racial domination as a unified structural process rather than as isolated social or psychological phenomena. Instead of treating *Native Son* as a mere reflection of social reality, the analysis emphasizes how Wright actively constructs racial inequality through narrative strategies such as characterization, spatial organization, and plot development, highlighting racism as a structuring force within the text.

The analysis is further informed by Wright's naturalist aesthetic, which underscores the deterministic influence of environment on individual behavior. Bigger Thomas is

thus read as a figure shaped by racially segregated space, economic deprivation, and pervasive surveillance, revealing how structural racism constrains agency and produces psychological alienation. Accordingly, the analysis proceeds in two stages. The first examines institutional forms of racism depicted in the novel, particularly in housing, education, employment, and the legal system. The second analyzes their psychological and social consequences, focusing on fear, alienation, and the internalization of racial oppression.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in literary analysis and informed by African American literary criticism. The analysis relies on close textual reading while situating narrative moments within their historical and institutional contexts. Instead of examining psychological states or social conditions in isolation, it traces how specific institutions, including housing, education, labor, and the legal system, generate corresponding emotional responses and behavioral patterns, allowing *Native Son* to be read as a relational mapping between social structure and individual consciousness. Race is treated as a central category of interpretation, and attention is given to narrative strategies such as characterization, spatial organization, plot development, and thematic emphasis. Textual evidence is drawn from passages depicting racial segregation, economic deprivation, and social surveillance, which are analyzed in two stages: first, representations of institutional racism, and second, their psychological and social consequences, including fear, alienation, internalized oppression, and criminalized resistance. Throughout, close reading is contextualized through relevant historical and socio-cultural scholarship to ensure analytical rigor and coherence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines how *Native Son* depicts racism as a structural system operating through institutions in Northern urban centers and analyzes its psychological and social consequences for Black Americans. The discussion first addresses institutional forms of racism and then explores their effects on inner life, including feelings of inferiority, hopelessness, alienation, and crime as a socially conditioned response to structural racism.

RACISM EXPERIENCED BY BLACK AMERICANS IN NORTHEREN URBAN CENTERS

Racialized Housing and Spatial Segregation in Northern Urban Centers

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright locates Bigger Thomas within the historical context of the Great Migration, during which millions of Black Americans relocated from the racially violent South to major northern cities such as Chicago in search of improved social and economic conditions. Although racial discrimination in the North was less overtly codified than in the Jim Crow South, Wright's narrative reveals that racism remained pervasive and structurally embedded, particularly in the domains of housing, education, employment, and the legal system. Through Bigger's lived experience, the novel exposes how seemingly informal practices functioned as powerful mechanisms of racial control.

Wright presents housing segregation as a central mechanism of racial oppression. Black residents are denied freedom of residential choice through racially restrictive customs enforced by white property owners and real estate agents. This practice is explicitly articulated in the courtroom exchange between Bigger's lawyer, Max, and Mr. Dalton, who admits to refusing to rent property to Black tenants outside designated areas, justifying the practice as "an old custom" and rationalizing segregation as beneficial to Black people themselves (Wright, 1940: 303). Wright uses this dialogue to expose how racial domination is normalized through paternalistic discourse, masking systemic exclusion as social tradition.

In *Native Son*, Wright renders segregation concrete by confining Black families to overcrowded and deteriorating spaces identified as the Black Belt, transforming the ghetto from a residential category into a form of spatial organization that enforces deprivation, surveillance, and psychological pressure. Wright's narration emphasizes the spatial rigidity of racial boundaries, noting that Black residents "had to live on their side of the line" and were categorically denied access to housing beyond racially prescribed boundaries (Wright, 1940: 233). These segregated spaces are depicted as economically exploited zones characterized by poor infrastructure, environmental decay, and social neglect. Despite inferior living conditions, Black tenants were forced to pay disproportionately high rents, a pattern characteristic of racially segregated housing markets in Chicago's South Side (Drake & Cayton, 1945). Bigger's mother's expression of frustration, "We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you" (Wright, 1940: 12), illustrates how structural oppression is internalized and redirected within Black families, producing psychological strain and interpersonal conflict.

Educational Exclusion and the Foreclosure of Black Mobility

Housing discrimination is further linked to racial inequality in education. Although *Native Son* does not focus extensively on classroom scenes, the novel indicates an educational system that marginalizes Black students by confining them to inadequately resourced institutions with limited opportunities for advancement. This depiction corresponds to well-documented patterns of educational discrimination in Northern urban centers, where Black students were relegated to overcrowded and inferior schools, diminished expectations, and exclusionary educational practices shaped by racially segregated neighborhoods (Clark, 1965; Essed, 2002). Such practices contributed to reduced educational attainment and constrained occupational mobility, reinforcing racial stratification.

Wright also illustrates institutional racism in higher education through Bigger's unfulfilled aspiration to become an aviator. Bigger explains that access to aviation training was denied through spatial exclusion, as educational institutions imposed residential boundaries that effectively barred Black applicants from admission (Wright, 1940: 327). This episode demonstrates how racial discrimination operates indirectly through seemingly neutral institutional policies that restrict Black access to advanced education and skilled professions.

Beyond Bigger's individual experience, the novel reflects a broader pattern of educational inequality in which Black students admitted to predominantly white institutions encountered persistent structural barriers, including discrimination in housing, financial aid, campus participation, and the recognition of Black Studies program. Such tensions reveal the conditional nature of Black inclusion within white-dominated academic spaces and echo sociological findings on administrative resistance to Black student demands for institutional equity (Schaefer, 1984: 273). For some, Black colleges became the only alternative, yet these institutions were themselves underfunded and often lacked formal accreditation (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, cited in Pinkney, 1975: 78), limiting graduates' social and economic mobility.

Racialized Labor, Economic Precarity, and the Great Depression

In the labor market, Wright portrays racial discrimination as a pervasive force that confines Black workers to low-status, low-wage, and unstable employment. Black Americans are consistently depicted as occupying the most menial positions, experiencing chronic unemployment, and remaining vulnerable to sudden dismissal. This structural marginalization is reflected in the broader social reality in which Black workers were "the last to be hired and the first to be fired" (McLemore, 1983: 137).

Such labor conditions are not presented as the result of individual failure but as the outcome of systemic exclusion that forecloses economic advancement.

The Great Depression intensifies racial inequality, functioning in *Native Son* as a historical force that magnifies existing structural vulnerabilities. Wright places Bigger Thomas within an urban environment marked by mass unemployment, economic collapse, and social desperation, conditions that affected the entire nation but disproportionately burdened Black communities. Historical accounts describe widespread poverty, displacement, and dependence on public relief during this period (Peck, 1991), circumstances that Wright translates into narrative detail through Bigger's prolonged idleness and limited prospects. Bigger and his peers are repeatedly shown lingering in public spaces, their inactivity reflecting not moral deficiency but the absence of viable economic opportunities: "They waited leisurely at the corners… they had plenty of time" (Wright, 1940: 31).

Institutional Racism and the Limits of Economic Relief

Reliance on public assistance further exposes the precarity of Black life under economic crisis. Wright draws attention to Black dependency on relief programs, a condition shaped by systemic unemployment and exclusion from stable work. Historical data indicate that by 1933, between 25% and 40% of urban Black populations relied on government aid for survival (Wright, 1969: 187). In the novel, this dependency becomes a source of anxiety and constraint, as Bigger's mother warns that refusal of employment would result in the withdrawal of relief and the loss of basic necessities (Wright, 1940: 16). Even when employment is secured, such as Bigger's position as a driver under a government-sponsored relief program (Wright, 1940: 48), it remains unstable and dependent on the approval and control of white employers.

Interracial relations further deteriorate as economic scarcity intensifies racial competition and resentment. During the Great Depression, this competition for limited employment translated into racial antagonism, with Black workers frequently scapegoated for structural economic failures. Scholars have observed that racial hostility escalated during this period as white workers sought to protect their economic position amid widespread insecurity (Cohen, 1990; Jones, 1972). Wright exposes the social consequences of this hostility by illustrating how crimes committed by Black individuals are generalized to the entire Black community, reinforcing stereotypes of inherent criminality.

> *"Listen, Jim. I'm a hard-working man. I fix the streets with a pick and shovel every day, when I get a chance. But the boss told me he didn't want me in those streets with this mob feeling among the white folks… He says I'll get killed. So he lays me*

> *off. Yuh see that goddamn nigger Bigger Thomas made me lose mah job… He made the white folks think we're all just like him!" (Wright, 1940: 235).*

Bigger's actions also provoke widespread racial hostility among white residents throughout the city, illustrating how individual acts by Black individuals are generalized into collective racial suspicion. In *Native Son*, Wright depicts how fear and racial panic lead to immediate economic retaliation against Black workers, as white employers dismiss them to avoid social stigma as "nigger lovers" or perceived danger to white safety. "It was reported that several hundred Negro employees throughout the city had been dismissed from their jobs. A well-known banker's wife phoned this paper that she had dismissed her Negro cook, 'for fear that she might poison the children'" (Wright, 1940: 229). These incidents reveal how deeply racial stereotypes permeate everyday life, transforming Black presence itself into a perceived threat. Through this episode, Wright demonstrates how racism operates not only through formal institutions but also through spontaneous acts of exclusion driven by racial hysteria.

Discrimination against Black workers in the novel is structured by the ideology of white supremacy, which asserts the inherent social superiority of whites under all circumstances (Thompson, 1974: 92). Within this racial hierarchy, Black labor is devalued through ideology, making occupational inequality appear natural and justified regardless of individual ability or effort. Wright reinforces this structural positioning through Bigger's testimony to Max, in which he articulates the gradual psychological erosion produced by chronic economic insecurity, job instability, and social degradation.

> *"Mr. Max, a guy gets tired of being told what he can and can't do. You get a little job here and a little job there. You shine shoes, sweep the streets; anything….You don't make enough to live on. You don't know when you're going to get fired. Pretty soon you get so you can't hope for nothing. You just keep moving all the time, doing what other folks say. You ain't a man no more. You just work day in and day out so the world can roll on and other people can live…." (Wright, 1940: 326).*

Bigger's reflection shows how racial capitalism deprives Black men of agency and dignity, treating them as tools of labor rather than as fully autonomous individuals. This sense of despair emerges not from personal failure but from long-standing structural exclusion.

Economic marginalization affects even into Black entrepreneurial efforts. Wright portrays the Black ghetto as an enclosed economic space in which Black-owned businesses struggle to survive against white commercial dominance. With limited access to capital and markets, Black entrepreneurs are largely restricted to personal

service industries deemed undesirable by whites, such as salon, beauty shops, and funeral services. Even basic commodities reflect racial exploitation, as white merchants charge higher prices to Black consumers within segregated neighborhoods. "He came to a chain store. Bread sold here for five cents a loaf, but across 'the line' where white people lived, it sold for four. And now, of all times, he could not cross that 'line'" (Wright, 1940: 233-234). Wright's depiction of unequal bread prices across racial boundaries highlights that segregation serves as a system of economic exploitation rather than simple spatial division.

Racial discrimination further manifests in the military sphere, where Black Americans are excluded from meaningful participation and assigned to menial labor roles. Bigger's remarks about the armed forces reveal how national institutions replicate Jim Crow hierarchies, denying Black men opportunities for skill development, honor, and advancement.

> *"Well, I wanted to be in the army once."*
> *"Why didn't you join?"*
> *"Hell, it's the Jim Crow army. All they want a black man for is to dig ditches. And in the navy, all I can do is wash dishes and scrub floors" (NS, 1940: 327).*

Wright uses this exclusion to emphasize the pervasiveness of racial domination, demonstrating that even institutions apparently commited to national unity reproduce racial subordination.

Policing, the Legal System, and the Criminalization of Black Life

The legal system emerges as one of the most overt mechanisms of racial control in the novel. Wright depicts Black Americans as disproportionately vulnerable to arrest, conviction, and severe punishment, reflecting systemic patterns in which racialized defendants receive harsher treatment than their white counterparts. They are also less likely to receive probation, parole, reprieve, pardon, or commutation of the death penalty. Consequently, "the prison population is overwhelmingly Black and Brown" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001: 10–11). Bigger's trial and sentencing demonstrate how the legal system values white lives over Black lives, a disparity confirmed by criminological studies showing that Black defendants accused of killing white victims face significantly higher risks of receiving the death penalty (Bruck as cited in Skolnick & Currie, 1988: 502). Max's failure to secure commutation for Bigger's sentence reveals the rigidity of racialized justice and the limits of liberal legal advocacy within a fundamentally unequal system.

Police violence constitutes another critical dimension of institutional racism in *Native Son*. Wright portrays law enforcement as an occupying force within Black neighborhoods, exercising arbitrary power through surveillance, mass arrests, and physical brutality. Bigger and his peers are repeatedly detained without cause, interrogated aggressively, and pressured to confess to crimes they did not commit (Wright, 1940: 52, 277). The mass roundup of Black men resembling Bigger "from the South Side 'hot spot': they were being held for investigation" (Wright, 1940: 229), further illustrates how racial profiling operates as a collective punishment mechanism. The novel's graphic depiction of Bigger's arrest, in which police drag and brutalize his body (Wright, 1940: 253), serves as a powerful symbolic enactment of state violence, reducing the Black body to an object of control and spectacle.

Rape Accusation, Media Sensationalism, and Racial Terror

Another powerful mechanism of racial control represented in *Native Son* is the persistent accusation of sexual violence against Black men. Wright situates this accusation within the ideology of anti-miscegenation, which criminalized interracial intimacy and cast Black male sexuality as inherently dangerous. Rooted in the racist stereotype of Black men as hypersexual and predatory, this ideology effectively defined any interaction between a Black man and a white woman as rape, regardless of consent. Within the logic of white supremacy, segregation and rigid caste boundaries were thus framed as necessary protections for white womanhood, while law enforcement functioned as an instrument for policing racial boundaries.

Wright explicitly addresses this phenomenon in his introduction, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," where he describes the routine arrest of Black men on unfounded rape charges as a defining feature of Black existence in America. He characterizes these arrests as a "representative symbol" of the profound instability and vulnerability of Black life under racial domination (Wright, 1940: xxviii). This framing demonstrates that the rape accusation functions not primarily as a legal claim but as a mechanism of racial terror that reinforces white dominance through fear, surveillance, and punishment.

The novel further depicts how mass media amplifies and legitimizes these racial myths. In *Native Son*, the press immediately labels Bigger as both a murderer and a rapist, igniting widespread white outrage before any legal determination is made. Sensational headlines transform Bigger into a symbol of racial threat, as public indignation escalates in response to the alleged "rape and murder" of a white heiress (Wright, 1940: 228). Although Bigger is responsible for Mary's death, the rape charge is entirely fabricated, demonstrating how racialized narratives supersede factual evidence in shaping public perception.

This distortion is institutionalized during Bigger's trial, where the state prosecutor, Buckley, repeatedly frames rape as the central crime in order to inflame racial hysteria and secure a conviction. "He killed her because he raped her! Mind you, Your Honor, the central crime here is rape! Every action point toward that!" (Wright, 1940: 377). By asserting that the destruction of Mary's body constitutes proof of sexual assault, Buckley relies on racist assumptions rather than material evidence. His insistence on an expedited trial further reveals how legal procedure is subordinated to racial sentiment, as he exploits the prevailing climate of fear to justify the pursuit of the death penalty. Max's recognition that moving the trial to another location would achieve nothing shows how deeply racial prejudice is pervasive across the state, making fair legal treatment virtually impossible for a Black defendant (Wright, 1940: 347–348).

Throughout the trial, Buckley's use of dehumanizing language, referring to Bigger as a "nigger," a "half-human black ape," and a "bestial monstrosity," exposes how deeply racist ideology permeates the legal system itself. Such rhetoric collapses the boundary between legal judgment and racial hatred, reinforcing the notion that Black defendants are inherently criminal and denied legal protection. As critics have noted, laws in a racially stratified society are often created, interpreted, and enforced by those in power, enabling their use as instruments of domination rather than justice (Jones, 1972; Nembhard & Robin, 2021; Stanford Law School, 2024). This moment crystallizes the novel's plot development, which traces a progression from economic exclusion and social containment to criminal accusation and legal condemnation, revealing how structural racism steadily narrows agency and leads predictably to violent outcomes.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF STRUCTURAL RACISM ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF BLACK AMERICANS IN NORTHERN URBAN CENTERS

Feelings of Inferiority

One of the most significant psychological consequences of structural racism depicted in *Native Son* is the internalization of feelings of inferiority among Black Americans. In psychological terms, feelings of inferiority can be understood as experiences of inadequacy and diminished self-worth that arise through social comparison and unequal power relations. Social-psychological research on stigma, discrimination, and internalized oppression demonstrates that such experiences are socially produced, particularly among marginalized groups exposed to structural inequality, repeated devaluation, and exclusion (David & Derthick, 2014; Major & O'Brien, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2014). Within the context of American racial hierarchy, such feelings are produced by the doctrine of Black inferiority, which asserts white superiority and relegates Black individuals to second-class status. Through everyday interactions and

institutional practices, this ideology normalizes the perception of Black people as socially and morally inferior, gradually shaping their self-perception.

Wright depicts how this doctrine becomes internalized within Bigger Thomas's consciousness, producing a persistent sense of fear, failure, and self-doubt. Bigger's internal monologue reveals the depth to which racist ideology has penetrated his psyche, as he momentarily accepts dehumanizing racial myths about Blackness as truth: "Maybe they were right when they said that black skin was bad, the covering of an apelike animal" (Wright, 1940: 251). Living under constant white scrutiny, Bigger comes to interpret his limited opportunities as confirmation of his presumed inferiority, demonstrating how sustained racial surveillance and structural exclusion undermine self-perception. Racism thus operates as a self-reinforcing system in which social deprivation reshapes self-perception, normalizes inferiority, and progressively constrains the capacity for autonomous judgment and agency. As Max later explains to Bigger, repeated exposure to degrading social conditions leads individuals to doubt their own judgment and humanity: "It's because others have said you were bad and they made you live in bad conditions. When a man hears that over and over and looks at him and that his life is bad, he begins to doubt his own mind" (NS, 1940: 390).

The novel further indicates how internalized inferiority produces ambivalent emotional responses toward white society, particularly fear and resentment. Bigger associates' whiteness with power, wealth, and authority, forces that govern his existence and restrict his autonomy. Although Black characters often attempt to manage this fear by complying with unspoken racial boundaries, Wright emphasizes that such strategies do not eliminate oppression. Instead, they reflect an awareness of omnipresent racial power. Even in moments of silence or apparent compliance, Bigger's consciousness remains structured by racial power, revealing domination as a psychological condition as much as a social reality (Wright, 1940: 109). Through Bigger's experience, *Native Son* reveals that feelings of inferiority are not personal deficiencies but socially produced effects of white supremacist ideology and structural constraint, functioning as a central mechanism through which racial domination shapes both psychological identity and social relations.

Hopelessness

Another pervasive psychological consequence of structural racism depicted in *Native Son* is the experience of hopelessness among Black Americans living in northern urban centers. Psychologically, hopelessness refers to the overwhelming belief that one's circumstances cannot improve and that individual action is incapable of producing meaningful change (Wortman et al., 1999: 513). Contemporary research further conceptualizes hopelessness as a cognitive state marked by negative expectations

toward the future and the perception that important goals are unattainable (Marchetti et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2020). Within Wright's narrative, this condition emerges as a direct response to structural exclusion and the ongoing denial of opportunities. Bigger Thomas articulates this sense of despair through spatial metaphors that emphasize racial separation and confinement.

> *"We live here and they live there. We are Black and they are white. They have things and we don't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in prison. Half the time I feel I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence…." (NS, 1940: 23).*

His observation that Black people "live here" while white people "live there" underscores the rigid boundaries that define racialized existence, limiting social mobility. Bigger and his family were part of Black migrants' wave who moved from the South to northern cities during the Great Migration in search of better social and economic opportunities. However, segregation and systemic discrimination transformed these aspirations into a daily reality of confinement, which Bigger likens to imprisonment, reflecting the psychological internalization of exclusion. Despite northern cities being associated with equality and opportunity, institutional racism, defined as the integration of discriminatory policies and practices within societal institutions (Tyson, 2006: 361), systematically denied Black Americans access to quality employment, housing, and education. This persistent exclusion undermined the belief that personal effort or migration could overcome racial hierarchy, intensifying Bigger's sense of hopelessness and powerlessness.

Wright extends the depiction of hopelessness beyond Bigger to other Black characters, highlighting its collective dimension. Bigger's mother, burdened by economic hardship and solely responsible for supporting her family, turns to religion as a form of psychological survival, seeking consolation in spiritual redemption rather than material change (Wright, 1940: 279). Bigger's younger brother, Buddy, withdraws from education and employment, displaying aimlessness and isolation that signal the early internalization of despair (Wright, 1940: 103). Similarly, Bessie, Bigger's girlfriend, responds to exploitative labor and constrained life prospects through self-destructive behaviors, including alcohol use and sexual relationships, as a way to numb her suffering (Wright, 1940: 131–132). Wright presents these behaviors not as moral failings but as consequences of systemic deprivation and emotional exhaustion, shaped by environmental conditions that severely limit choice and agency.

The novel also captures the gradual loss of hope among Black youth who initially believe that education, discipline, and hard work will lead to upward mobility. Over time, however, repeated exposure to racial barriers undermines this belief, producing resignation and cynicism (Wade, as cited in Davis & Woodman, 1984: 247). Bigger's

reflection on his inability to pursue education or military service, despite witnessing white peers do so, highlights the racial limits imposed on aspiration (Wright, 1940: 328). His acknowledgment that most Black boys he knows are "ain't got nothing and ain't going nowhere" (Wright, 1940: 330) reveals how hopelessness becomes a shared consciousness rather than an individual emotion.

Bigger's longing to belong to American society further intensifies his despair. Through mass media such as films, magazines, and advertisements, he is exposed to images of prosperity and inclusion that remain perpetually out of reach. As Max later articulates in his closing argument, these representations function as "tokens of mockery," offering the illusion of participation while reinforcing exclusion (Wright, 1940: 363). Wright thus exposes the cruel paradox of the American Dream, in which its promises are vividly displayed yet systematically denied to Black Americans.

Feelings of Alienation

In *Native Son*, Wright represents alienation as both a social condition imposed by segregation and a psychological state internalized by Black Americans living in northern urban ghettos. Ghetto residents are not only spatially isolated from the rest of the city but are also excluded from the cultural, recreational, and institutional life associated with middle-class society. Economic deprivation and racial stigma prevent meaningful participation in these spheres, reinforcing a persistent awareness of being perceived as inferior, uncultured, or socially deficient. Such stereotyping produces shame and resentment, deepening a sense of estrangement from the nation to which they formally belong.

These feelings of alienation are intensified by the long historical legacy of racial oppression in the United States, which renders the formation of a shared national belonging with whites exceedingly difficult. Bigger articulates this estrangement when he tells Max that "white folks and Black folks are strangers," pointing to the enduring distance and mistrust that structure interracial encounters (Wright, 1940: 324–325). His perception reflects an accumulated historical consciousness shaped by segregation, surveillance, and unequal power relations. Consequently, Black characters often avoid contact with whites unless such contact is unavoidable, recognizing the risks embedded in interracial interaction. Bigger's discomfort in the presence of the Daltons and Jan further exemplifies this condition. His fleeting desire for inclusion is quickly replaced by embarrassment and anxiety, as he recognizes the impossibility of crossing racial boundaries without consequences (Wright, 1940: 46). Wright's own reflections on his lived experience further substantiate this representation of alienation. Even after achieving literary success, Wright reported that racial identity continued to mark and limit his everyday experiences, from housing discrimination to social unease in public

spaces (McCall, 1969: 14). This parallel demonstrates that alienation is not overcome by individual achievement but is reproduced through enduring racialized social structures.

Spatial segregation plays a crucial role in sustaining this estrangement. Despite living in close proximity, White and Black communities remain socially distant, separated by rigid housing policies and segregated institutions such as schools, hospitals, and public facilities. Mary Dalton's confession that she has never entered a Black home, despite living only ten blocks from the ghetto, reveals how segregation produces ignorance as well as distance.

> *"You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into those houses," she said, pointing to the tall, dark apartment building looming to either side of them, "and just see how your people live. You know what I mean? I've been to England, France, and Mexico, but I don't know how people live ten blocks from me. We know so little about each other. Never in my life have I been inside a Negro home. Yet they must live like we live. They're human… There are 12 million of them… They live in our country… In the same city with us…" Her voice trailed off wistfully (Wright, 1940: 70).*

Her language, in which she refers to Black people as "your people," "they," and "them," reveals an unconscious othering that positions Black Americans as foreigners within their own country. Even her assertion that Black people are "human" paradoxically reinforces division, as it implies that whiteness remains the unspoken norm against which humanity is measured. Mary's liberal intentions do not lessen the structural racism embedded in her worldview. Her assumption that Black people must live "like us" in order to qualify as fully human reveals the classed and racialized limitations of liberal sympathy. Wright thus demonstrates that seemingly liberal white characters may unintentionally reproduce racial alienation through everyday language and behavior, which subtly reaffirm white centrality and authority.

Social taboos governing interracial contact further reinforce alienation. Social practices including shared meals, addressing whites without honorifics, and occupying common social spaces are regulated by racial etiquette intended to maintain white dominance. Although such rules are less explicit in the North than in the South, they remain powerful. Bigger's embarrassment at dining with Jan and Mary in a Black-owned restaurant reflects his awareness that such visibility violates deeply ingrained racial norms and may provoke hostility from both Black and White observers (Wright, 1940: 71). Similarly, his difficulty in abandoning deferential forms of address, such as "Mr.," "Mrs.," or "Miss," even when Jan invites informality (Wright, 1940: 73), demonstrates how racial hierarchy is internalized through habitual performance.

Bigger's uncertainty about how to conduct himself before Mr. Dalton further demonstrates this internalized alienation. His avoidance of eye contact, submissive posture, and anxiety over proper behavior reveal an embodied knowledge of racial power relations shaped by constant racial surveillance and the anticipation of punishment (Wright, 1940: 50).

Alienation also manifests in mutual suspicion between Black and White communities. Black characters distrust Whites because everyday experience has taught them that apparent friendliness may conceal danger or hostility, just as whites routinely approach Black presence with suspicion and emotional distance (Wright, 1940: 60). Bigger's inability to trust even sympathetic figures such as Mary, Jan, and Max reflects the contradiction of liberal interracial engagement, as these characters profess equality while disregarding the rigid racial codes governing interracial contact. The violation of such codes exposes Bigger to social danger rather than those who claim to support him. Although Mary and Jan treat Bigger as an equal, this gesture intensifies his anxiety because he knows that surrounding white observers would react with anger to seeing a Black man shake hands with whites, address them by their first names, or sit beside a white woman in public. The equality they offer is therefore conditional and tightly controlled, dependent on white permission and easily withdrawn (Wright, 1940: 66), reinforcing Bigger's awareness that meaningful racial equality remains unattainable within a racially stratified social order.

Wright also shows that alienation extends inward, shaping Bigger's relationships with his family, peers, and himself. His disgust with his family's poverty and resignation, coupled with his volatile temperament, isolates him emotionally from those closest to him. This internalized tension also disrupts his interactions with friends, as the anger and resentment accumulated under conditions of racial oppression make sustained intimacy and mutual trust difficult. Racism thus fractures not only interracial relationships but also intraracial bonds, producing a profound sense of self-alienation. Bigger's shame, anger, and frustration undermine his ability to form stable relationships, illustrating Wright's broader critique of how systemic racism erodes social cohesion and distorts individual identity.

Crime and Structural Racism

Within *Native Son*, Wright presents crime not as an innate racial trait but as a social and psychological response to structural racism. By displacing biological explanations of Black criminality, the novel emphasizes how racial oppression generates alienation, internalized hostility, and rage that shape individual perception and behavior. Persistent exclusion from employment, housing, and social mobility produces conditions consistent with the frustration–aggression hypothesis, in which blocked

aspirations foster chronic frustration and anger that may, at times, manifest in violent expression (Kruglanski et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 1997).

Wright situates Bigger Thomas's criminal actions within the economic deprivation of the Great Depression, when economic dislocation and residential segregation intensified vulnerability in marginalized urban neighborhoods, a pattern corroborated by sociological research on rising delinquency in lower-class communities (Drake & Clayton, 1945; Shaw & McKay, 1942). Bigger's thefts and robberies (Wright, 1940: 351, 17, 137) thus emerge as survival strategies within a social order that forecloses lawful means of subsistence. This logic culminates in the killing of Mary Dalton, which Bigger experiences as a momentary assertion of agency and self-definition against the power of whiteness. Wright renders this perceived empowerment with bitter irony, revealing how Bigger's sense of becoming human is founded on violence born of desperation rather than freedom. Crime thus offers neither liberation nor autonomy but instead reveals the social order's role in producing the very forms of criminality it later condemns.

The influence of mass media deepens the complexity of Bigger's psychological condition. Newspapers, magazines, and films circulate images of wealth, freedom, and happiness associated with the American Dream, intensifying the gap between aspiration and reality. This contradiction produces what Clark (1965: 12) identifies as a painful psychological conflict, in which oppressed individuals are uncertain whether their failures stem from personal inadequacy or racial exclusion. Many, including Bigger and his peers, resolve this tension by rejecting societal values that have already rejected them and turning instead toward delinquency and violence.

Through this portrayal, Wright deliberately engages with and subverts the racist stereotype of the Black male as inherently violent and criminal. While white society interprets Bigger's actions as confirmation of racial inferiority, the novel insists on a different reading. Bigger is not born a criminal but shaped by segregated housing, educational exclusion, economic deprivation, and relentless racial terror. As a "native son," he emerges as a product of American society itself, not an alien presence but a mirror reflecting its structural injustices. Through Bigger's tragic trajectory, Wright demonstrates that crime is not a racial essence but a social consequence of systemic oppression.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that in *Native Son*, racism operates through interconnected institutions that shape both material conditions and inner life. Housing segregation confines Black residents to spaces of deprivation, exclusion from education restricts access to social mobility and intellectual development, labor discrimination renders

economic stability unattainable, and the legal system transforms racial fear into punitive control. Together, these structures produce a psychological environment marked by inferiority, alienation, and chronic insecurity. Bigger Thomas's formation under these conditions reveals how social relationships are fractured, self-perception eroded, and nonviolent forms of agency foreclosed. His turn toward violence does not arise from inherent criminality but from a social order that repeatedly denies recognition, dignity, and opportunity.

By tracing how institutional racism generates specific psychological effects, *Native Son* exposes the mechanisms through which American society produces the very behaviors it later condemns. Wright's novel thus challenges interpretations that reduce racial violence to individual moral failure or cultural deficiency, instead presenting racism as a systemic force that organizes urban life, shapes consciousness, and sustains racial domination over time.

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