

# I

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## The Literary Ecology of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*

We have long known that Richard Wright was deeply impressed by the work of the Chicago sociologists as he wrote *Native Son*. Lawrence Buell has usefully interpreted *Native Son* in the context of environmental determinism, in line with literary naturalists and “urban fiction” going back to Dickens.<sup>1</sup> However, the specifically ecological discourse Wright employs in *Native Son* and *Black Boy* commands attention, shedding light on his general theory of literary expression as well as social processes.

The very sociologists who influenced Wright were in close collaboration with leading-edge ecologists, particularly in botany. Sociological terms and concepts of community shaped botanists’ work, for example, while botanists’ studies of biological “succession” and the like informed social theory, ideas of social “metabolism,” and what Robert Park called “human ecology.”<sup>2</sup> Ernest W. Burgess, for example, spoke of urban transformation in biological terms of “metabolism,” adopting then-current tendencies of plant and animal ecologists to think of biotic zones as organisms. (Later “organism” was rethought as “community” and eventually “ecosystem” beginning in the 1940s.) According to ecological theories of succession, the organisms in any space prepared the ground for other species that would in turn alter the local biota, such that the place would be taken over by new life forms, the soil would be altered by these, and so on. Sociologists imported this concept to their studies of urban “zones.”

In *Native Son*, Boris Max echoes such theories: “injustice blots out one form of life, but another grows up in its place with its own rights, needs, and aspirations.”<sup>3</sup> White men have attempted to prevent this form of life from spreading into their own habitat, have “marked up the earth and said, ‘Stay there!’ But life is not stationary.”<sup>4</sup> Max emphasizes the interconnection of life forms and the consequences of attempting to segregate one form of life from others. Such attempts had helped create, he says, “our whole sick social organism”<sup>5</sup>: “I plead with you to see a mode of *life* in our midst, a mode of life stunted and distorted, but possessing its own laws and claims, an

existence of men growing out of the soil prepared by the collective but blind will of a hundred million people.”<sup>6</sup> This new life form, Max asserts, expresses itself in terms of its own fulfillment, not in terms of white society’s “good” and “bad.”

Max uses biological terms metaphorically at times, but his argument is explicitly ecological throughout. To refer to Bigger Thomas as a new form of life is not merely a metaphor. And a city is not what “nature” is not, but rather one of the kinds of habitats that human animals build. These habitats become death traps for some – like Bigger’s apartment for the rat he kills at the opening of the novel – for all life within them is interconnected. Only by understanding how strongly Bigger’s life and fate are linked to everyone else’s in the society can “we” find, asserts Max, “the key to our future, that rare vantage point upon which every man and woman in this nation can stand and view how inextricably our hopes and fears of today create the exultation and doom of tomorrow.”<sup>7</sup>

As Wright presents it, the Marxist explanation of history, which also pervades Max’s speech, has much to recommend it but fails to address Bigger’s most fundamental need. Bigger’s cry for understanding to Max in their final conversation, “what I killed for I *am!*” – which repels even Max – makes complete sense from an ecological point of view.<sup>8</sup> Wright affirms the import of Bigger’s search for *meaning*, a value the author considered essential to human life. As the philosopher Thomas Alexander has recently put it in his book subtitled *Eco-Ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence*:

Human beings seek to live with a concrete, embodied experience of meaning and value in the world. We *need* to feel that our own lives are meaningful and have value. This is a biological claim insofar as if this need is denied we either die or become filled with destructive rage.<sup>9</sup>

To Wright, writing came from a visceral need to wring meaning out of deadlocking tensions and was thus a key to survival.

Ralph Ellison later took Wright to task for environmental determinism, for not giving enough attention to individual agency, to which Wright replied, “I don’t mean to say that I think that environment *makes* consciousness . . . but I do say that I felt and still feel that the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped . . . the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions.”<sup>10</sup> In *Black Boy*, Wright emphasizes that his childhood *environment* gave no encouragement to writing; he had to leave to find the instrumentalities to express and thus save himself.

For Wright, imaginative writing was a sort of naturally occurring weapon that, while battling injustice, could liberate those hidden springs

of action – feelings, the affects – lying between bodily experience and consciousness. He joined a growing contingent of left-oriented writers and artists of the late 1930s and 1940s discontented with Marxist orientations that subordinated aesthetics and creative expression to political and economic theory. These artists were rethinking the genesis and goals of creative expression as an inherent aspect of human nature. Its relationship to the environment was potentially ontological, the processes of its utterance understood as forces in the ecosystem.<sup>11</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, for example, called poetry a “transfer of human energy.”<sup>12</sup> The dynamics and “meanings” of a poem do not inhere in the words or images but emerge in the relations among its elements:

The science of ecology, is only one example of an elaboration of the idea, so that the life of land may be seen in terms of its tides of growth, the feeding of one group on another, the equilibrium reached, broken, and the drive toward another balance and renewal.

But in areas dealing with emotion and belief, there is hesitation. Their terms have not been invented . . . a poem, a novel, or a play *act emotions out* in terms of words, they do not describe.<sup>13</sup>

Initiated at the meeting point of individual consciousness and the world, Rukeyser stresses, poems are about the “*in*vironment, where live the inner relationships.”

Rukeyser emphasized “the moving relation between the individual consciousness and the world . . . I think human energy may be defined as consciousness, the capacity to make change in existing conditions.”<sup>14</sup> Sociopolitical conditions are part of a more encompassing environment that inspires, even forces, creative expression. A similar attitude toward novel writing serves as the dynamic core of Wright’s autobiography.

I should say “autobiographies,” for the original *American Hunger* was shortened for Book of the Month Club adoption, ultimately with the new title *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. In the 1970s, the second part of the original, dealing with Wright’s experiences after leaving the South for Chicago, was separately published as *American Hunger*; and finally the Library of America published the “original” version in 1991, annotated by Arnold Rampersad, with both parts – “Southern Night” and “The Horror and the Glory” – under the title *Black Boy (American Hunger)*.

Although Wright had already written and published portions of what eventually went into Part One of his autobiography, he claimed that he gained inspiration for the book when delivering a talk in 1942 to an interracial audience at Fisk University. Without a formal plan in advance, he began talking about his early life and the role of racism and racial self-hatred

in his experience. As he warmed to his theme, he felt a rising tension in the room.

There was but little applause. Indeed, the audience was terribly still, and it was not until I was half-way through my speech that it crashed upon me that I was saying things that Negroes were not supposed to say publically, things that whites had forbidden. What made me realize this was a hysterical, half-repressed, tense kind of laughter that went up now and then from the white and black faces.<sup>15</sup>

His characterization of the laughter coming up from “white and black faces” suggests an involuntary, physical, and collective response – signaling the ethical impasse of the occasion. His tale of his own experience forced his audience to face the truth of their bad faith in their relationships with each other – a truth they routinely repressed. Inspired by the charged energy in the room ignited by his story, Wright abandoned a novel on which he was working to write an autobiography.<sup>16</sup> The effect of his outspokenness at Fisk would be mirrored in the effect he sought to achieve in his autobiography. During a radio interview, he added that his main desire “was to render a judgment on my environment. That judgment was this: the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings.”<sup>17</sup>

Wright was writing about not only the barbarity of southern racism but also white liberals’ inability to face their implication in white dominance, their responsibility for helping sustain the silence around black experience. However, in *Black Boy*, as in *Native Son*, the protagonist’s own shortcomings due to fear and shame are also central. To acknowledge one’s fear and shame is a special duty of the writer who aims to bring to consciousness the buried truth of human “feeling.” For human beings, to Wright, are those earthbound organisms whose complex feelings have a particularly strong bearing on their destiny.

*Black Boy* begins with young Richard at age four, being chastised for talking and then, trying to manage his boredom, accidentally setting fire to his house. He is overcome by fear and then is beaten nearly to death by his mother. The chapter ends with the grown Richard Wright re-meeting his father and contemplating how far he has come in consciousness. The rest of the book details how he got from here to there and escaped his father’s fate. One of Wright’s main emphases, as in *Native Son*, is how fear and shame prevent human communion by interrupting honest self-examination and communication – hence the importance of writing.

Chapter Two shows Richard’s dawning grasp of the line between “white” and “black,” which is all the more confusing because his grandmother is

“white” in appearance. Hearing stories about white atrocities awakened “confused defensive feelings”; as these feelings became conscious, he fantasized about defying white power, which enabled him to keep his “emotional integrity”:

These fantasies were no longer a reflection of my reaction to the white people, they were a part of my living, of my emotional life; they were a culture, a creed, a religion. The hostility of the whites had become so deeply implanted in my mind and feelings that it had lost direct connection with the daily environment in which I lived . . . Tension would set in at the mere mention of whites and a vast complex of emotions, involving the whole of my personality, would be aroused. It was as though I was continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behavior could not be predicted. I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings.<sup>18</sup>

His reference to the “tension” aroused by the mention of whites suggests a response centered in the body, and “the threat of some natural force whose hostile behavior could not be predicted” binds his physiological response to Wright’s larger ecological cast of thought.

In fact, Wright presents the responses of blacks and whites to each other as almost pre-linguistic, physiological, even though they are ultimately productions of a particular social history and its ideologies. These affects, in Wright’s case, had been transmitted not (at first) through contact with whites but by way of his family and black acquaintances. They have both deeply personal and collective aspects.<sup>19</sup> No creature is autonomous, no individual or species disconnected from the whole. Growing older, Wright learned to make friends with older boys “by subscribing to certain racial sentiments. The touchstone of fraternity was my feeling toward white people, how much hostility I held toward them . . . None of this was premeditated, but sprang spontaneously out of the talk of black boys who met at the crossroads.”<sup>20</sup>

When his mother had a stroke and nearly died, Richard was sent to live with an uncle. The suffering of his mother profoundly affected him as he came to the conviction that “the meaning of living came only when one was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering.”<sup>21</sup> From his mother’s anguish, he gained insight into the suffering of others. This dawning awareness drew him to writing, especially to fiction. At the end of Chapter Four, he tells about the first story he wrote and shared with a girl who asked what it was for and why he wrote it. He tells her he “just wanted to.” The point here is how alien written fiction was to his world: “My environment contained nothing more alien than writing or the desire

to express one's self in writing."<sup>22</sup> Yet the episode also emphasizes the instinctive nature of his drive toward creative self-expression.

Up to the point when he discovers the public library in Memphis, the book details Richard's conditioning by and resistance to his environment, demonstrating a kind of inborn sense of integrity that makes him "dangerous" (to his own survival as well as others') and that makes the South dangerous to him. He becomes conscious of how his feelings are stunted and shaped to the fear and terror around him. He sees it in others, too. In this state, however, he comes upon the power of the written word to express unspoken feelings.

A newspaper article denouncing H. L. Mencken inspires him to acquire Mencken's *A Book of Prefaces* from the library. The writing stuns him: "what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it."<sup>23</sup> Before this, Wright has constantly gotten himself in trouble for what he *says* – first to his grandmother in an early scene, then his uncle, his mother, and ultimately white coworkers and others. The danger of speech is a constant refrain. He has had to learn to guard his words and his feelings. So this bare use of words as weapons is a revelation. "Who were these men about whom Mencken was talking so passionately?"<sup>24</sup>

His impulse to dream, to imagine, was reawakened. Again, the impulse is almost precognitive, physiological: "Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different."<sup>25</sup> This was, in other words, an aesthetic/affective awakening primarily, but with ethical consequences. The meaning of "Hunger" in the text now attaches to the hunger to read and to write.

The effect of reading continues to change the atmosphere: "I went to work, but the mood of the book would not die; it lingered, coloring everything I saw, heard, did."<sup>26</sup> It's all about the *feelings* the books are able to express and evoke in the reader. Reading fiction that Mencken praised, Richard found that "[t]he novels created moods in which I lived for days."<sup>27</sup> Coming to greater understanding of the people around him, he writes that now he "could feel the very limits" of his boss's "narrow life" after reading Sinclair Lewis's account of George F. Babbitt.<sup>28</sup> Dreiser's novels "revived in me a vivid sense of my mother's suffering."<sup>29</sup>

He could not at this time express what he derived from the novels, "for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself. All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism, of the modern novel."<sup>30</sup> The ecological point of view in *Black Boy* grows insistent. "I now knew what being a Negro meant. I could endure the hunger. I had learned to live with hate. But to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life itself was beyond

my reach, that more than anything else hurt, wounded me. I had a new hunger”<sup>31</sup> – a hunger to *feel* and to *write*. His survival depended on it. “I no longer *felt* that the world about me was hostile, killing; I *knew* it. A million times I asked myself what I could do to save myself, and there were no answers.”<sup>32</sup> He has a hunger for “books that opened up new avenues of feeling and seeing.”<sup>33</sup>

He came to realize that he could not survive in the South. If he organized with other blacks and fought, they would lose. If he fought openly he would die. Submitting to the “genial slave” life was “impossible.”<sup>34</sup> It becomes a matter of survival that he move North and pursue his dream of reading and writing.

The second part of the “original” *American Hunger* is set in Chicago, but more than being about the North as such (as critics usually emphasize) it is chiefly about Wright’s experience with the Communist Party in relationship to the hunger driving him. The title itself, “The Horror and the Glory,” pertains not to “the North” but to Communism. The “glory” is the vision of human unity, of all hearts beating as one, of collective *feeling*, that Communism offered him. The “horror” is the blindness and ignorance that the party bred in its members.

When Richard first tried to master narrative, partly inspired by Stein’s *Three Lives*, he would pound out “disconnected sentences for the sheer love of words.”<sup>35</sup>

My purpose was to capture a physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression, an accomplishment which seemed supremely worth struggling for. If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative. I strove to master words, to make them disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spiral of emotional stimuli, each greater than the other, each feeding and reinforcing the other, and all ending in an emotional climax that would drench the reader with a sense of a new world. That was the single aim of my living.<sup>36</sup>

This kind of writing might be called a transfer of energy. But Wright lacked a framework, a reference to social reality, and “theories to light up the shadows of conduct.”<sup>37</sup> It’s at this juncture, while working at the post office in Chicago, that he becomes connected with the John Reed Club, an arm of the Communist Party that nurtures young writers and artists.

Through the John Reed Club, magazines published by the Communist Party, and the Federal Writers Project (where party members helped him), Wright was able to find work as an author, and comradeship, for the first

time. In effect, he became dependent on the party for sustaining himself as a writer. But gradually he came up against the party's hostility to "intellectuals" and its attempts to limit what he read and wrote.

Much as Bigger Thomas's search escapes the understanding of Boris Max, Wright's struggle for expression of African American experience escaped his comrades' comprehension. Taking notes on the lives and vigorous speech of the "black boys" of the South Side, Wright observed that "Wrestling with words gave me my moments of deepest meaning."<sup>38</sup> Such wrestling, for Wright, meant allowing images to take shape "out of the depths of me . . . feeling my way, trying to find the answer to my question," as opposed to beginning with an answer.<sup>39</sup> For this he was suspected of Trotskyism. His very ability to continue writing honestly was imperiled, and we have seen how central writing was to his sense of survival. His response was visceral: "Must I discard my plot-ideas and seek new ones? No. I could not. My writing was my way of seeing, my way of living, my way of feeling; and who could change his sight, his sense of direction, his senses?"<sup>40</sup> He had to quit the party to preserve his sense of integrity.

If Part One, "Southern Night," had ended with a new hunger, for feelings denied him – the feelings of other people and a feeling of oneness with them – Part Two concludes after Wright witnesses such oneness in the Communists' trial of a friend. The condemned man, after being "sundered" from the group through alleged wrongdoing, confessed his guilt and begged for forgiveness. To Wright, this was "a spectacle of glory; and yet, because it had condemned me, because it was blind and ignorant, I felt that it was a spectacle of horror."<sup>41</sup> As a result, Wright knows he "would never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, would never again express such passionate hope, would never again make so total a commitment of faith."<sup>42</sup>

After his break with the Communist Party, Wright believed humanity must discover a new unity; this hunger for unity was inborn in the human heart. Wright's vision remains both humanist and ecological: "If this country can't find its way to a human path, if it can't inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, black as well as white, are going down the same drain . . ." <sup>43</sup> This realization sets Wright's task before him. He must use words to bring human beings together; and yet he must do so knowing that in some sense words and feelings stand opposed; this tension defines the aesthetic challenge that drives literary creation.

I picked up a pencil and held it over a sheet of white paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words. Well I would wait, day and night, until I knew what to say. Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside.<sup>44</sup>



Rather than trying to represent the path toward a human unity already envisioned, he would have to write experimentally. That is, without a teleology, a faith that provided answers in advance, he would have to “hurl words into the darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.”<sup>45</sup>

As Wright’s literary reputation grew, his dependence on the Communist Party waned. His biggest break came when the Book-of-the-Month Club (BOMC) offered to adopt *Native Son* as a main selection, which would very likely help it become a best-seller. The club asked for changes to particular scenes of a primarily sexual content, and Wright rewrote those scenes. These changes, which have been exhaustively studied, indicate the compromises that Wright had to make in order to reach the wider readership the Book Club would open up, while Harper & Brothers had already accepted the book without those changes and had it in galleys.<sup>46</sup>

This episode indicates the publishing environment black writers (and not only black writers) of the time had to negotiate. Yet Wright did not feel the changes he made compromised his integrity; nor did they prevent the book from setting off a shock wave in the literary field and selling 200,000 copies in just three weeks.<sup>47</sup> *Native Son* was immediately recognized as epochal in importance by exposing Americans’ bad faith on issues of race, freedom, and democracy. Probably no book by a black author has had a more profound impact on American writers’ treatments of race. And, together with Wright’s next major book, his autobiography, it made Wright artistically self-sufficient.

As with *Native Son*, in 1944 BOMC approached Wright’s editor and agent about offering *American Hunger* as a main selection. But they wanted only “Southern Night,” the first part of the book (about two-thirds of the whole). Clifton Fadiman, one of the judges, suggested changing the title to “First Chapter,” which would suggest another chapter to come.<sup>48</sup> According to Arnold Rampersad, Wright attributed their demand to Communist influence, since most of Part Two concerned his involvement with and then alienation from the Communist Party.

Ignoring this possibility and that suggested by Fadiman’s title, recent scholars have speculated that BOMC judges objected to Wright’s attacks on racism in the North and the suggestion that no place in America was safe for a black man. Both hypotheses are plausible, but the attack on Southern culture in the first part of the book was far more likely to limit national distribution than the second part. It seems just as likely that the club considered the first part of the book more interesting as a story for a general

middle-class audience and functional as a unit in its own right. They may also have been worried about paper allotments in the midst of wartime rationing, when print runs had to be cut back and books came out with slim margins on cheap paper, in small type.

Regardless of the reasoning behind the BOMC request that “The Horror and the Glory,” be dropped, Wright had to rewrite the ending of what had been “Southern Night.” It was too abrupt to end the book. As Fadiman requested, he should “summarize briefly, and make explicit, the meaning that is now implicit in the preceding pages.”<sup>49</sup>

Wright could have declined the BOMC offer since Harper & Brothers already had *American Hunger* in page proofs, with a dust jacket designed and ready for publication. Critics have lamented the fact that the book club opportunity convinced him to change the book, ending it on a note that seems more conventionally optimistic than he had originally intended. Michel Fabre expressed this attitude most succinctly in his “Afterword” to the 1977 edition of *American Hunger*: “*Black Boy* is commonly construed as a typical success story, and thus it has been used by the American liberal to justify his own optimism regarding his country.”<sup>50</sup> But Wright did nothing to compromise his integrity while turning the editorial challenge to his advantage.

In the revised ending, Wright muses on what had made him feel as he did:

From where in this southern darkness had I caught a sense of freedom? Why was it that I was able to act upon vaguely felt notions? What was it that made me feel things deeply enough for me to try to order my life by my feelings? . . . How dare I consider my feelings superior to the gross environment that sought to claim me?<sup>51</sup>

In the expanded conclusion to what had been “Southern Night,” the ecological Wright comes once again to the fore:

Whenever my environment had failed to support or nourish me, I had clutched at books. . . . In the main, my hope was merely a kind of self-defense, a conviction that if I did not leave I would perish . . . The substance of my hope was formless and devoid of any real sense of direction . . . The shocks of southern living had rendered my personality tender and swollen, tense and volatile, and my fight was more a shunning of external and internal dangers than an attempt to embrace what I felt I wanted . . . It had been my accidental reading of fiction and literary criticism that had evoked in me vague glimpses of life’s possibilities . . . And it was out of these novels and stories and articles, out of the emotional impact of imaginative constructions of heroic or tragic deeds, that I felt touching my face a tinge of warmth from an unseen light; and in my leaving I was groping toward that invisible light, always trying to keep my face

so set and turned that I would not lose the hope of its faint promise, using it as my justification for action.<sup>52</sup>

Wright had used the metaphor of “a tinge of warmth from an unseen light” in the original version of the book, near the end of Chapter Fifteen in “The Horror and the Glory,” and shifted it to this more expansive conclusion to what had been “Southern Night.” He was responding to Fadiman’s suggestion that he summarize and make explicit the themes of the narrative, and to Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s desire that he indicate more clearly how American writers had given him hope.<sup>53</sup>

All of this suggests pressure to accommodate the BOMC’s need to be assured of wide sales to justify its low prices, and to respond to a white supporter who had previously vouched for *Native Son*. (Fisher, a judge for the BOMC, had a long history of supporting African American civil rights and black writers, going back to the early years of the century.) Wright remained opposed to ending the book on an optimistic or patriotic note, which he did not believe the narrative could support. However, Fisher never offered her recommendations as conditions for acceptance of the manuscript, and the original *American Hunger* had already prominently featured the importance of H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, and Theodore Dreiser to Wright’s literary awakening, as we have seen. In a letter to Fisher, he also argued that Mencken, Dreiser, and Lewis had been influenced by European thinkers.

Fisher insisted he should do nothing contrary to his own artistic sensibilities. She wanted him to mention the dissenting voices of American literature but concluded, “of course, (this goes without saying) if you don’t honestly believe this is true, if I am mistaken even a single word would be a dreadful travesty.”<sup>54</sup> Fisher remained worried and highly self-conscious about her recommendations: “Anything I say is just a personal notion of mine, and you must not take it too seriously. . . . *You certainly are the best judge*. Whatever you decide to do, I’ll accept without question.”<sup>55</sup>

About a week later, after learning from Wright’s editor that he was finishing revisions in response to her suggestions, she wrote Wright to say that this news made her

very uneasy for fear you are going beyond what you really feel is honest. I’d never forgive myself if (in my own attempt to be honest) I had stepped beyond the line of permissible influence on a younger writer! Don’t you put in a single word which is not from your heart, like all the rest of your fine book! You have a grand ending as it is. I feel I shouldn’t have written as I did, that second time!<sup>56</sup>

She was showing the kind of honesty Wright asked of his readers, without insisting that he accommodate her feelings. He made revisions to recap and emphasize, in his new concluding chapter, the inspiration he had received from American writers. Critics have suggested that these additions hardly provided the kind of patriotic endorsement Fisher might have been hoping for as World War II approached its close. But in fact it was precisely the dissenting voices in American writing that she, recently descended from radical abolitionists and an admirer of Thoreau, was moved by.<sup>57</sup> Fisher wrote a review of *Black Boy* for the BOMC newsletter, sharing it with Wright for his approval, and the book club added a portion of this review to the front matter (again with Wright's approval) as an "Introductory Note."

As far as we know, Wright never regretted his revisions, and he was overjoyed when the book appeared. "It is a beautiful book, slender, modern-looking, and with a good binding. It is strange that when reality comes true you cannot think of what to say; the moment fails; the look of things remains the same . . . you strain to feel what it is that you dreamed."<sup>58</sup> Two days later he wrote, "I fell asleep thinking that *Black Boy* was out over the land, that people were reading about my life, about how I grew up, about how I felt and feel."<sup>59</sup>

Most of "The Horror and the Glory" had been or would be published in the mainstream liberal *Atlantic* (where "I Tried to Be a Communist" ran in two long installments in August and September 1944), *Harper's* ("What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You" in December 1942), *Cross Section* 1945, and *Mademoiselle*.<sup>60</sup> The book itself topped the best-seller list from April to June of 1945 and by July had sold 425,000 copies (30 percent more than *Native Son* had sold in five years), inspiring a reissue of his first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*.<sup>61</sup> Between the wider sales of a shorter book and the money received from the magazines, Wright undoubtedly made more money than if the BOMC had published his original manuscript as accepted by Harper & Brothers, let alone if he had passed up the BOMC offer entirely. It made his career sustainable for the foreseeable future.

As for the contemporary reception of *Black Boy*, Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi had this to say on the floor of the US Senate:

There is another book which should be taken off the book racks of the nation; it should be removed from the book stores; its sales should be stopped. It is the recent book of the month, which has had such great sale. . . . It is entitled "Black Boy," by Richard Wright. . . . The purpose of the book is to plant the seeds of hate in every Negro in America against the white men of the South or against the white race anywhere, for that matter. That is the purpose. Its purpose is to

plant the seeds of devilment and trouble-breeding in the days to come in the mind and heart of every American Negro. Read the book if you do not believe what I am telling you. It is the dirtiest, filthiest, lousiest, most obscene piece of writing that I have ever seen in print.<sup>62</sup>

It did indeed plant seeds that one finds sprouting in such subsequent books as the Filipino-American Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946). That it had been selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club made the book all the more dangerous to the American public, in Bilbo's view. Black critics including W. E. B. Du Bois worried that the book was "unrepresentative," giving a bleak view of black culture. By contrast, a reviewer for Boston's *Morning Globe* managed to find in its publication and wide distribution proof of American exceptionalism, for only in America would such an eloquent rebel against his own country get so wide a hearing.<sup>63</sup>

With the financial success of *Black Boy*, Wright was able to move with his family to Paris, secure in his profession as no black author preceding him had ever been. Today we are fortunate to have the "original" autobiography as Harper's would have published it, something made possible by modern textual scholarship and Wright's place on college syllabi since the 1970s. Yet the transfer of energy the book delivered in its first published version could be most shocking only in the environment and climate that brought it into being. Today, read mainly as an assignment in college courses and in relation to African-American literary tradition, the book does different work.

## Notes

1. Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and the World* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2001), 131–142.
2. Emanuel Graziano, "Ecological Metaphors as Scientific Boundary Work: Innovation and Authority in Interwar Sociology and Biology," *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (1996): 874–907; and Gregg Mitman, *The State of Nature: Ecology, Community, and American Social Thought, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
3. Richard Wright, *Native Son*, in *Early Works: Lawd Today!, Uncle Tom's Children, Native Son* (New York: Library of America, 1991), p. 812. All subsequent citations of *Native Son* refer to this text.
4. *Ibid.*, 815.
5. *Ibid.*, 809.
6. *Ibid.*, 809.
7. *Ibid.*, 803–804.
8. *Ibid.*, 849.

9. Thomas Alexander, *The Human Eros: Eco-Ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 6.
10. Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," in *Early Works*, 862.
11. One excellent example is John Steinbeck, whose friend and collaborator Edward F. Ricketts was a marine biologist who earned his PhD at the University of Chicago under the influential ecologist W. C. Allee. See especially John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts, *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research* (1941; New York: Penguin, 2009).
12. Muriel Rukeyser, prefatory statement to *The Life of Poetry* (New York: A. A. Wyn, 1949), n.p.
13. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
14. *Ibid.*, n.p.
15. "Richard Wright Describes the Birth of *Black Boy*," *New York Post*, November 30, 1944, B6.
16. Trudi McCullough, "Author Richard Wright Champion of Negro Rights," *New Haven Sunday Register*, April 8, 1945, sec. III, 10; Rpt. in Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, eds., *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 61–62.
17. Anonymous, "How Richard Wright Looks at *Black Boy*," *PM*, April 15, 1945, 3–4. Rpt. in *Conversations*, 64–65.
18. Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, in *Later Works: Black Boy (American Hunger) and The Outsider* (New York: Library of America, 1991), 72. All subsequent citations of *Black Boy (American Hunger)* refer to this text.
19. For an impressive treatment of this phenomenon, see Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).
20. Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, 75
21. *Ibid.*, 96.
22. *Ibid.*, 116.
23. *Ibid.*, 237.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 238.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 239.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, 240.
34. *Ibid.*, 241.
35. *Ibid.*, 267.
36. *Ibid.*, 268.
37. *Ibid.*, 271.
38. *Ibid.*, 324.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 329.
41. *Ibid.*, 356.
42. *Ibid.*, 363.

43. *Ibid.*, 356, ellipsis in original.
44. *Ibid.*, 365.
45. *Ibid.*
46. For discussions of the changes Wright made to *Native Son* to gain BOMC adoption, see especially John K. Young, “‘Quite as Human as It Is Negro’: Subpersons and Textual Property in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*,” in George Hutchinson and John K. Young, eds., *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race since 1850* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 67–81; Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 63–64, 82–83; Claudine Raynaud, “Changing Texts: Censorship, ‘Reality,’ and Fiction in *Native Son*,” in Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow, eds., *Richard Wright: New Readings in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Arnold Rampersad, “Too Honest for His Own Time,” in Robert J. Butler, ed., *The Critical Response to Richard Wright* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 164–166 (rpt. from *New York Times Book Review*, December 29, 1991, 3); and Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 180–184.
47. Young, “‘Quite as Human as It Is Negro’,” 78.
48. Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 286–287.
49. Clifton Fadiman quoted in Young, “‘Quite as Human as It Is Negro’,” 84, from Selected Records of Harper & Brothers, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
50. Michel Fabre, “Afterword,” in Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 140.
51. Richard Wright, *Later Works*, 878, n. 246.5.
52. *Ibid.*, 878–879, n. 246.5.
53. See Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Richard Wright, July 12, 1944, in Mark Madigan, *Keeping Fires Night and Day: Selected Letters of Dorothy Canfield Fisher* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 234, 235.
54. Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Richard Wright, July 1, 1944, in *Keeping*, 233.
55. Fisher to Wright, July 12, 1944, in *Keeping*, 234, 235.
56. Fisher to Wright, July 21, 1944, *Keeping*, 236.
57. See especially Fisher to Wright, July 23, 1944, *Keeping*, 236–237. For other discussions of the changes to *American Hunger* Wright made to satisfy the Book-of-the-Month Club and Fisher, see especially Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 286–290; Janice Thaddeus, “The Metamorphosis of *Black Boy*,” in Henry Louis Gates Jr., and K. A. Appiah, eds., *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad, 1993), rpt. from *American Literature* 57.2 (May 1985): 199–214; Jeff Kareem, “‘I Could Never Really Leave the South’: Regionalism and the Transformation of Richard Wright’s *American Hunger*,” *American Literary History* 13.4 (Winter 2001): 694–715; and Young, “‘Quite as Human as It Is Negro’,” 81–88.
58. Richard Wright to Leon Wright, February 14, 1945, quoted in Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 309.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Wright, “Early Days in Chicago,” in Edwin Seaver, ed., *Cross-Section 1945: A Collection of New American Writing* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1945),

- 306–342; “American Hunger,” *Mademoiselle* 21 (September 1945): 164–165, 299–301.
61. Karem, “‘I Could Never Really Leave the South’,” 710.
62. June 27, 1945, 79th Congress, 1st Session, Congressional Record Volume 91, 6808.
63. Karem, “‘I Could Never Really Leave the South’,” 711.