

**Striking Back at the New Overseer: Response to White Panopticism in the Works of
Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Ralph Ellison**

by

Mark Joseph Henderson

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Approved by

Sunny Stalter, Chair, Assistant Professor of English

Susana Morris, Assistant Professor of English

Marc Silverstein, Professor of English

Kelly Kennington, Assistant Professor of History

Abstract

This dissertation examines the representation of institutional surveillance of mid-twentieth-century African-American urban migrants in the works of Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Ralph Ellison. I see the Wright-Petry-Ellison “trinity” as a pivotal development in the artistic/literary documentation of the urban migrant experience. This development entails a departure from the mysterious “forces” of naturalism to the more identifiable and human sources of the forces of oppression acting upon the urban migrants. Central to this examination is the image of the “New Overseer,” the Orwellian, twentieth-century version of the pre-bellum overseer. This New Overseer, given his more modern and industrial urban setting, has much more sophisticated and subtle strategies of white panopticism, or the systemic surveillance of the African-American urban population in order to contain and control their movements, both physically and socioeconomically. Given the continued racial discrimination experienced by African-Americans post-Emancipation, I also see the migration narratives of these authors as revisiting the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, particularly those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, in order to rediscover their triumphs against the old overseer’s white panopticism.

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Chapter One: “The New Overseer”

This is an examination of the representative works of Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Ralph Ellison—namely, Native Son, The Street, and Invisible Man, respectively, along with some other works by each—in terms of *white panopticism*, or the seemingly constant and omnipresent surveillance on the part of a dominant white force (culture, government, agency, institution, etc.) of non-white, especially black, citizens for purposes of oppression, disenfranchisement, and segregation. To me, this common presence of white panoptic power among these three authors is indicative of a new and particularly shocking African-American urban migration narrative, one which sets them apart and signals a progression from the Dreiseresque urban naturalism that so influenced them (especially Wright). In the works of Wright, Petry, and Ellison, the elusive and seemingly nonhuman forces of naturalism are replaced by a more tangible, malicious, and easily located panoptic group or individual “overseer”—a word whose significance will be crucial to my examination, given the racial specificity with which these forces select and target their subjects.

In the context of the historical placement of these authors¹ and their importance to not only African-American literature but American literature *period*, I call this panopticism the “New Overseer.” This choice of name obviously harkens back to the nineteenth-century slave narratives, of which I see the Wright-Petry-Ellison trinity as a newer, more modern, post-Great

¹The publication dates of these authors’ representative works span twelve years of the mid-twentieth century: Native Son (1940), The Street (1946), and Invisible Man (1952).

Migration version. “Overseer,” after all, seems an appropriate choice of name not only for its obvious Orwellian connotations; consider what is perhaps the most oppressive psychological strategy used by the overseer² in what is arguably the best-known slave narrative, that of Frederick Douglass: Edward Covey, the “nigger-breaker” to whom Master Thomas sends Frederick “to be broken” (The Narrative 67-68), creates a paranoid atmosphere of constant surveillance among the slaves by sneaking up on them, even crawling on his hands and knees to avoid detection and pretending to ride away on his horse only to actually hide close by and watch their every move. As Douglass recounts: “His work went on in his absence almost as well as in his presence [...] He appeared to us as being ever at hand. He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation” (71). Similarly, in Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,³ Dr. Flint keeps a constant, jealous and predatory watch over Harriet (his slave), especially when she comes in contact with other men—even the overseer and his own son! Even within the expected security of meeting a lover on a street corner, she looks up and sees Dr. Flint watching them from his window (174-175). She realizes with a chill that he “had an iron will, and was determined to keep [her], and to conquer [her]” (176).

Both examples call to mind Michel Foucault’s discussion of panopticism and his use of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon as a guiding metaphor in Discipline and Punish:

²The primary function of antebellum overseers was the supervision and management of his employer’s (the plantation owner’s) most valuable asset, the slaves. However, it should also be pointed out that, as opposed to Covey, Dr. Flint is clearly not a literal overseer; he is the slaveowner. However, his surveillance of Jacobs is included in this examination for his specific, predatory targeting of a female slave—his selective “seeing over” of Jacobs. The antebellum overseer should not be confused with the plantation owner, for though his duties are clearly in the interests of the plantation owner, he nonetheless is subservient to the plantation owner. The notorious cruelty of these overseers, as hinted by Douglass through the example of Covey, is in fact a method of preserving their livelihood by ensuring and perpetuating the reputation of their effectiveness for keeping slaves in line. As William Kauffman Scarborough points out, most overseers were pressured by their employers into a by-any-means-necessary approach through initial poor pay and generally uncertain tenure (6).

³First published in 1861, sixteen years after the publication of Douglass’ Narrative.

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (201)

It is crucial that, according to Foucault, “the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (201). Even before they are confronted with the urban setting and the more sophisticated mechanisms that the modern era’s technological advances afford white panopticism, the would-be migrants of Douglass’ and Jacobs’ slave narratives (themselves) feel these Foucauldian effects of white panopticism. Through the low-tech but nonetheless effective system of night patrols and unevenly scheduled surprise supervision-visits by the slaveowner and/or his overseers, as well as the web-like dissemination of supervision duties among the slaveowner and and his overseer, the actual, pre-urban slaves of slave narratives are not spared the oppressive power of white panopticism. Their experiences, in fact, foreshadow what is perhaps the further horror in the more intricate and subtle systems to be confronted not only by themselves in the urban North, but their modern-era, Great-Migration descendants as well.

Panopticism, then, is what links the Douglass-esque slave narrative and the post-bellum, pre-Harlem African-American literature that would immediately follow it,⁴ as well as the Harlem

⁴“Post-bellum, pre-Harlem” is Charles W. Chestnut’s adjective, used as the title his 1931 essay, and appropriated into the title of Caroline Gebhard and Barbara McCaskill’s collection of essays, Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African

Renaissance literature that would follow that, with the Wright-Petry-Ellison school of the African-American urban migration narrative. The New Overseer's new white panoptic regime makes up the "new" slavery with which the African-American migrating to the cities in the North must frustratingly and further contend in hopes of truly winning his/her freedom; as Johnson's anonymous protagonist in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man explains the seemingly perpetual nature of the "battle" against slavery, it "was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul," then "as to whether he had sufficient intellect to master even the rudiments of learning," and today "it is being fought out over his social recognition" (55). The ever-shifting strategies of the enslaving dominant culture thus make the "battle" seemingly impossible to win by constantly changing the game.⁵ There are, however, some key differences between—and, in fact, developments from—the white panopticism of Douglass' time (the middle of the nineteenth century), place (the rural, isolated setting of a plantation), and overall context (slavery before the Emancipation Proclamation⁶) to that of post-bellum, pre-Harlem literature, Harlem Renaissance literature, and the mid-twentieth-century literature of Wright, Petry, and Ellison. And these differences hinge upon new strategies adopted within the master-slave relationship, on the part of both master *and* slave—white panopticism from the "master," and a late-coming "terrible honesty" (the term is Ann Douglas')

American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919. In terms of migration and panopticism, this period is perhaps best represented by Paul Laurence Dunbar in The Sport of the Gods (1902) and James Weldon Johnson in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912). Both works anticipate the Harlem Renaissance through their representation of the Tenderloin district, described by Robert M. Dowling as notorious for its proliferation of dance halls, brothels, cabarets, and gambling clubs, yet also producing a "black Bohemia that would serve as a model for the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s in Harlem (117).

⁵Also, as the "ex-colored" man's rich white travel companion explains the seeming impossibility of getting completely rid of slavery to him in Europe: "We hit slavery through a great civil war. Did we destroy it? No, we only changed it into hatred between sections of the country" (106).

⁶The Emancipation Proclamation was issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863. Native Son was published, as the first footnote has already indicated, in 1940.

from the “slave”; hence the need for a *new* slave narrative, provided by Wright, Petry, and Ellison.

First of all, one notices a move from something closer to naturalism, with its apparently arbitrary and nonhuman, environmental/hereditary “forces” acting upon a helpless and hopeless protagonist, to protagonists demonstrating more agency and control over their own destiny. Sure, Bigger is clearly influenced by the white hegemonic forces of American capitalism, materialism, and urban segregation, but he is ultimately powerless, even in spite of the arguable protest in the terror he creates through his crimes. This is markedly obvious when placing the essentially doomed Bigger and the more ambiguously hopeful situation of Ellison’s “invisible man” side by side, with the sad and high-priced “escape” of Petry’s Lutie Johnson in the middle. Also, there is an overall progression in tone from the bleak and hopeless to the more ironic, humorous, and optimistic. Of the three, Ellison seems to stress the individual (aside from purely racial identity) the most; and it is also with Ellison and his “invisible man” that one sees the ultimate reclaiming of the Douglass-esque victory. But this victory must be over a new kind of Covey—that is, the New Overseer, a new overseer with a new strategy.

I. *The Master’s New Strategy*

In his introduction to Albert Memmi’s The Colonizer and the Colonized, Jean-Paul Sartre explains how the guilt-ridden colonizer (the dominant, usurping force) can only exonerate himself and justify his actions through “the systematic pursuit of the ‘dehumanization’ of the colonized” (xxvi-xxvii).⁷ Memmi himself warns of the dangerous desperation that the colonizer

⁷Sartre also mentions the unavoidable and reciprocal *self*-dehumanization of the colonizer seeking to dehumanize the colonized: “[S]ince he denies humanity in others, he regards it everywhere as his enemy. To handle this, the colonizer must assume the opaque rigidity and imperviousness of stone. In short, he must dehumanize himself, as well” (xxviii).

creates for himself upon realizing his being caught between his wanting to disown the colonized “while their existence is indispensable to his own,” and that, having chosen to maintain the colonial system, the colonizer “must contribute more vigor to its defense that would have been needed to dissolve it completely” (54). Within the Faustian pact that is colonialism, the colonizer⁸ thus becomes a monster of his own making, whose relentlessness and adaptability—here, as the New Overseer—is evidence of his absolute need for the colonized as his slaves. Whatever form that the slavery assumes, and whatever methods are undertaken by the enslaver, he, as a colonizing force, must continually absolve and justify himself not only by promoting his own supposed virtues and superiority, but by degrading and dehumanizing the colonized population as well. The persistence of suffering and discrimination experienced by African-Americans in particular beyond literal slavery is proof of the oppressor’s entrapment within the “circle” of the colonial apparatus (54). To attest to his own humanity, then, the colonizer must render the colonized subject “hardly a human being,” even an “object,” having ultimately succumbed to the colonizer’s “supreme ambition” of the colonized’s existing “only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, i.e., be transformed into a pure colonized” (86).

In a 1940 letter to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison seems to pick up on this importance of dehumanization as a part of the colonizing process:

He, Bigger, has what Hegel called the “indignant consciousness” and because of this he is more human than those who sent him to his death; for it was they, not he, who fostered the dehumanizing conditions which shaped his personality.

When the “indignant consciousness” becomes the “theoretical consciousness” indignant man is aware of his historical destiny and fights to achieve it. Would

⁸I use “colonizer” in place of Memmi’s more specific term of “colonialist,” which he defines as “only a colonizer who agrees to be a colonizer” (45).

that *all* Negroes were psychologically as free as Bigger and as capable of positive action!

Bigger Thomas, within the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, is clearly the slave, whose “indignant consciousness” springs from a burgeoning *self*-consciousness. Hegel’s outlining of the master-slave relationship within an existential framework can easily be appropriated for a postcolonial point of view to examine the problematic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized—specifically, between the dominant white culture and its black subjects (between the white master and the black slave). Hegel’s master-slave dialectic is especially helpful within a postcolonial context since it is a relationship that is inherently self-defeating—doomed from the start, with what seems an inevitable turn toward crisis and revolution, as history has so often proved.

Viewed through this postcolonial lens, Hegel’s explanation of the master-slave dialectic can be divided into a few key stages: the defining of the initial colonial situation, the realization of what I call the “colonial dilemma” and the *true* relationship between master and slave on the part of the master, and that same realization on the part of the slave.

Both master and slave begin in the *colonial situation* as two unequal and opposing entities, with “their reflection into a unity [...] not yet [...] achieved,” one being “the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself,” the other “the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another”; the “lord”⁹ is the “consciousness existing *for itself* which is mediated with itself through another consciousness,” the “bondsmen” (633). The slave’s service is in itself “impure and unessential” (634), an action done within his relationship to the master, making that action not his own but the master’s action by virtue of his rule over the slave. The outcome, then, is “a recognition that is one-sided and

⁹In Alix Strachey’s translation of Hegel, the master is the “lord [*Herr*]” and the slave is the “bondsmen [*Knecht*]” (633).

unequal,” with the slave’s consciousness rendered unessential “by its dependence on a specific existence” (634)—namely, his self-obliterating servitude. But the master achieves his very self-recognition through the slave’s consciousness of his servitude; the master, as it turns out, *needs* the slave, and therein lies his *colonial dilemma*—for when confronted with the slave, the master realizes that his own consciousness within the master-slave relationship is “not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one,” the “*truth*” of which is provided by “the servile consciousness of the bondsman” (634). And this realization, of course, threatens to work both ways, for “just as lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude in its consummation will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is; as a consciousness forced back into itself, it will withdraw into itself and be transformed into a truly independent consciousness” (634). Servitude, as it turns out, is also a self-consciousness, one whose position holds more power than it may have initially realized—hence Douglass’ understanding that his defending himself against Covey will go unreported because of Covey’s own fear of losing his reputation as an effective overseer and slave-breaker. This is what Paul Gilroy refers to in The Black Atlantic when he returns to the example of Douglass’ confrontation with Covey to explain how Douglass makes the master “the representative of a ‘consciousness that is repressed within itself,’” and how, as an author, Douglass transforms Hegel’s “metanarrative of power” into a “metanarrative of emancipation” (60).

What the master apparently fails to take into consideration is how the tactics of fear so typically involved with subjugation actually *create* and *exacerbate* self-consciousness in those upon whom those tactics are imposed. The “pure universal moment” created by the subject’s fear of death, “the absolute Lord,” allows for the “absolute melting-away of everything stable,” and this is the “essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, [and] *pure being-for-*

itself" (635)—in other words, what was initially thought to define the place of the *master* within the dialectic! The slave's fear of the master leads to self-consciousness and self-realization, which leads to the slave's awareness of the master's dependency upon him within the master-slave relationship; in a *one-on-one* master-slave relationship—the norm in the case of nineteenth-century slave narratives—the master's methods for oppression are ultimately counterproductive, often planting the seeds of his own undoing. The urban overseer of the twentieth century would then need a new strategy, a new kind of panopticism—one more subtle and insidious, and less one-to-one—to maintain his dominant position.

II. *White Panopticism: Covey Everywhere*

Confronted with the urban space, the African-American fleeing the South to find refuge in the North finds what is perhaps an even more daunting version of what he had hoped to escape. This new environment in the North seems, in fact, to have honed and refined many of the mechanisms and institutions of southern slavery—in a fashion and to a degree that is all the more deceptive and disorienting. Rather than the obvious seclusion afforded by the plantation and its isolated rural landscape, the city allows for a more paradoxical hidden-ness—a public hiding in plain sight afforded by the convoluted windings of its labyrinthine streets and anonymity within large crowds. The overseers of this northern slavery are, then, even more difficult to locate; and, given the city's technological and bureaucratic sophistication, the New Overseer's seeming powers of constant surveillance are much closer to the truth than the illusion created by the older and more crude strategies of a Covey.

Yes, Edward Covey is everywhere now. It is a new time, with the slave replaced by the black migrant; but also with a new slavery, a New Overseer, and a new white panopticism—

hence the need for a new slave narrative. Douglass himself attests to how his experiences in the North certainly did not mark the end of his problems; once in New York City, he soon learns that he is “still in an enemy’s land,” having been told by a runaway slave “that the city was now full of southerners, returning from the springs; that the black people in New York were not to be trusted; that there were hired men on the lookout for fugitive from slavery, and who, for a few dollars, would betray me into the hands of the slave-catchers; that I must trust no man with my secret” (My Bondage 249). Beyond this immediate danger, which he will prove to surmount, however, are the longer-lasting effects of a migrant’s being confronted with the urban North:

A sense of my loneliness and helplessness crept over me, and covered me with something bordering on despair. In the midst of thousands of my fellow-men, and yet a perfect stranger! In the midst of human brothers, and yet more fearful of them than of hungry wolves! I was without home, without friends, without work, without money, and without any definite knowledge of which way to go, or where to look for succor. (249)

Loneliness, uncertainty, and poverty are the key grievances here, and poverty is the most tangible; it proves to be the embittering commonality between himself and the poor white apprentices who beat him over job competition. But loneliness, uncertainty, and poverty together, however, prove to be the defining features of the North’s “new slavery.”

Similarly, upon reaching New York, Harriet Jacobs is discombobulated by the “noise of the great city” (318) and is surprised by the apparent general lack of alarm and even notice given to people “screaming fire in the streets” (321) even before realizing that the city is “swarming with Southerners, some of whom might recognize [her]” (337). Dr. Flint himself even makes a visit to New York in an attempt to find her, and a letter from Emily Flint, her former mistress’

daughter, makes it clear to her that Dr. Flint's family had been tracking her movements, even her trip to Europe (336, 352). And this was all, as Jacobs writes, *before* the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law!¹⁰ Jacobs' case, of course, is complicated and made more particular by her gender, which makes her a more obvious and vulnerable candidate for sexual predation, exploitation, and abuse. Motherhood too becomes an additional worry, as well as a point of psychological manipulation and intimidation to be potentially used against her by her (mostly male) pursuers.¹¹

The mode, the mechanism, which creates migrants' urban grievances, however, is what Farah Jasmine Griffin calls "urban power," which "separates and categorizes individuals" and "sustains a discourse around race, sex, and desire which confines the black migrant" (102). This power manifests itself as urban segregation¹² and points toward forces far more human and intentional than those associated with naturalism, in which the mysterious forces acting upon the characters seem almost supernatural in their apparent arbitrariness. In a specifically African-American context, these conscious and human forces—landlords, housing agents, politicians, local businessmen, law enforcement, etc.—are actively willing to "resort to the use of force and repression when necessary" (Griffin 102). The more hidden and insidious nature of this new slavery not only seems a continuation of the old slavery; many conclude that it is, in fact, worse—from Douglass' account of some runaway slaves "preferring the actual rule of their masters, to the life of loneliness, apprehension, hunger, and anxiety, which meets them on their

¹⁰After the Fugitive Slave Law is actually passed, she is lucky enough to be sheltered by someone who is against it (362). More could certainly be said here concerning the panopticism in Dr. Flint's specific machinations to isolate and "break" Harriet, but it is perhaps more appropriate to save such details for Chapter 3, which is devoted specifically to Ann Petry.

¹¹As the same sort of female counterpoint to the Frederick Douglass narrative as Ann Petry is to both Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, the special case of Jacobs will be further discussed in the third chapter, which is devoted to Petry.

¹²The collect-and-quarantine methodology of housing discrimination in particular calls to mind how the system of colonialism, in its begrudging need of a perpetual supply of the colonized, "wills simultaneously the death and the multiplication of its victims" (Sartre xxvii). Memmi even specifically mentions living conditions as a chief means through which the colonizer denies liberty to the colonized (85-86).

first arrival in a free state” (My Bondage 250), to Jake Jackson, the protagonist of Wright’s Lawd Today!, who concludes that the only difference between the North and the South is “them guys down there’ll kill you, and these up here’ll let you starve to death” (180). Blacks coming north, from runaway slaves to Great-Migration migrants, would experience a profound disillusionment in realizing how “their search for a freer space [had] led to a space where they are confined in ways they had never imagined” (Griffin 102). The migrant’s disillusionment is one chiefly born of a frustration with the more indirect tactics of the North’s white panoptic power. Its closer-to-actual omnipresence (as opposed to the South’s illusion of omnipresence) is virtually a *given* because of the elusiveness of its source; it becomes, then, almost another part of the scenic urban environment, like the streets, skyscrapers, and even the sky—an unquestioned, unfronted, and often unnoticed part of the background, like the city’s very fiber. And to the black migrant, of course, this assumption is white. This is in accordance with George Lipsitz, who says, “Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see [...] As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (1). In other words, as the representative emblem of the dominant culture, whiteness is the given, what goes without saying; as Richard Dyer explains in White: “As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (1). But, as Lipsitz elaborates, this is no passively acquired boon of chance, but something much more orchestrated and sinister: “Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories, but also through the creation

of social structures that generate economic advantages for European Americans through the possessive investment in whiteness” (2).

The value placed upon whiteness as a result of such an investment on the part of the dominant culture grows out of a shrewd desire to maintain social, cultural, and economic power; and as the playing field on which this power is to be maintained changes—say, as a result of a Civil War, the abolishing of slavery, and ensuing civil rights movements—so must the white hegemony’s methods for maintaining its power. As Lipsitz points out, “There has always been racism in the United States, but it has not always been the same racism. Racism has changed over time, taking on different forms and serving different social purposes in each time period” (4). Furthermore, it is a sad fact and a sobering testimony to the desperate ingenuity of white hegemony that even the most successful of antiracist mobilizations seem to always inspire “reactionary forces” which help to engineer “a renewal of racism in new forms during succeeding decades” (5). These new forms of racism bring with them a new form of white panopticism, a specifically urban brand that is much more elusive, widely disseminated, and less isolated than the rural kind demonstrated by Edward Covey and Dr. Flint in Douglass’ and Jacobs’ narratives, respectively—and more obviously akin to the panopticism discussed by Foucault.

The development of one form of white panopticism (urban) from another (rural) coincides with the development of one facet of American Gothicism¹³ from another—from the

¹³In referring to the American Gothic tradition, I mean not only the most obvious examples but the tropes of those examples and their presence within and influence upon other, less obvious examples—i.e. works with a more arguably “gothic” status, that might more quickly or easily fall under another category—such as naturalism, crime fiction, etc. Moreover, the qualifier *American* in American Gothic already calls attention to the reappropriating of the old European tropes within a new national context; the American Gothic got its *start* as a reappropriated, bastard genre of tropes. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd Smith demonstrated both soberly and humorously their awareness of such arguments over purism by including Maurice Levy’s “‘Gothic’ and the Critical Idiom” as the first essay in their collection *Gothick Origins and Innovations*. In it, Levy laments how the word “gothic” has “shown a prodigious capacity for adaptation and an uncommon appetite for conquering new semantic space” (9). However, even Levy

dungeon-like horrors within the isolation of the plantation so often depicted in slave narratives,¹⁴ to the terrifying sense of paranoia and lack of privacy created by the far less easily located sources of surveillance within a large city¹⁵; in short, from a plantation gothic to an urban gothic. The Gothicism of plantation life was certainly not lost on Douglass, particularly in his description, in My Bondage and My Freedom, of Colonel Edward Lloyd's "home plantation," which sounds like something right out of the European Gothic, the ominous and autonomous castle with God-knows-what going on behind its walls:

In its isolation, seclusion, and self-reliant independence, Col. Lloyd's plantation resembles what the baronial domains were, during the middle ages in Europe. Grim, cold, and unapproachable by all genial influences from communities without, *there it stands*; full three hundred years behind the age, in all that relates to humanity and morals. (50)

Indeed, Paul Gilroy points out how Douglass "conceived of the slave plantation as an archaic institution out of place in the modern world" (59), as a perverse preserving ground for barbarity that should have no place in a supposedly civilized and modern society. Colonel Lloyd's "home plantation" is but one example of "certain secluded and out-of-the-way places [...] seldom visited by a single ray of healthy public sentiment," where slavery can be "indecent without shame, cruel without shuddering, and murderous without apprehension or fear of exposure" (My

concludes that "another voice in me speaks a different pitch [and] whispers into my reluctant ears that life after all is movement, that words belong to no one, that each generation has a right to project onto them the cultural and fantasmal images of its own choice" (15).

¹⁴According to Leslie Fiedler, American literature, of all the fiction of the West, is "bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (29). Particularly for African-Americans, however, the horrors depicted (rather, documented) in slave narratives and in all African-American literature to follow those narratives is much closer to home; the sadism, violence, and grotesquerie are painfully real-life.

¹⁵In American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction, Alan Lloyd-Smith uses the billboard of the "panoptican optician Dr. T.J. Eckleburgh" presiding over the "Valley of Ashes" in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby as an example of a typical American urban gothic trope (1).

Bondage 48). The plantation, then, acts as a kind of micro-state in its seclusion from prying eyes and wagging tongues, complete with its own very rigid class system—“SLAVEHOLDERS, SLAVES and OVERSEERS” (My Bondage 49)—and virtual economic self-sufficiency: “Thus, even the glimmering and unsteady light of trade, which sometimes exerts a civilizing influence, is excluded from this ‘tabooed’ spot” (My Bondage49). And adjoining micro-states certainly are not going to disapprove of their neighbor’s atrocities, if Colonel Lloyd is any example (which, of course, he is):

Nearly all the plantations or farms in the vicinity of the ‘home plantation’ of Col. Lloyd belong to him; and those which do not, are owned by personal friends of his, as deeply interested in maintaining the slave system, in all its rigor, as Col. Lloyd himself. Some of his neighbors are said to be even more stringent than he is. (49)

Public sentiment, to Douglass, is exactly what the plantation, by design, works to avoid; this is the motivation behind its isolation, and its white panopticism functions within this sequestered space.

Within the urban landscape, panopticism finds a more complex playground; the sheer size and attractiveness of the metropolis provides a concentration of the masses which intensifies all of the older gothic effects of the wilderness—paranoia, primal regression, lawlessness, distortion of perception, racial doubling and ambiguity, etc.—while also adding the newer effects of labyrinthine complexity, anonymity, crime, and the underworld. Within the cityscape, the dimensions of panoptic surveillance as well as its scope are reversed and intensified, as Foucault explains:

In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions—to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide—it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of the supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. (200)

The public is not avoided or deflected but embraced and *used*. The public, in a sense, becomes the very agent of white panopticism in the cityscape; rather than having the plantation's more easily located centers of white supremacy (slaveholder and overseer), the public provides the matrix for Foucault's "punitive city"—in fact, a "coercive institution"—behind whose overwhelming vastness the now more elusive dominant culture can seemingly hide and project itself multiform, as "hundreds of tiny theatres of punishment [...] tirelessly repeat[ing] the code" of difference and punishment (113). As the new and defining tool of white hegemony, this urban white panopticism, like Foucault's Panopticon and punitive city, is a functioning of the dominant culture's penal power, "distributed throughout the social space [...] present everywhere as scene, spectacle, sign, discourse," to the extent that its power is no longer seen as that of certain individuals over others, "but as an immediate reaction of all in relation to the individual" (129-130).

Urban white panopticism works, then, through a sense of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance—"domination-observation" (305)—"capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible [...] transform[ing] the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network" (214). White hegemony is thus disindividualized, dispersed, its power "not so much in a personal as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes" (202)—virtually beyond location and made analogous with the cityscape itself. This

defines the power of this “New Overseer” and his white panopticism is the frustrating sense of *nowhereness* created by his intimidating illusion of *everywhereness*—that he is so *everywhere* that he cannot be pinpointed and found to make the kind of one-on-one stand which had so defined Douglass in the face of Edward Covey. For his omnipresence to be revealed for the myth that it is, the overseer must be located and confronted, and with the New Overseer this is virtually impossible; his omnipresence is, after all, part of the very culture that so torturously influences and Other-izes the protagonists of Wright, Petry, and Ellison. Whether it be Buckley in Wright’s Native Son, Junto in Petry’s The Street, or the Brotherhood in Ellison’s Invisible Man, the migrant’s (the new slave’s) victory over the New Overseer (if there is a victory at all, which arguably occurs only in Ellison’s novel) is certainly more ambiguous than Douglass’ and Jacobs’ victories.

Equally key to the New Overseer’s successful avoidance of becoming demythicized—in accordance with Foucault’s description of the hegemony’s dissemination of its panoptic power within the society it seeks to control—is the *internalization* by the urban populace, especially its African-American members, of the white panopticism’s criteria for enforcing and maintaining its expected Norm.¹⁶ The punishment dealt by the New Overseer, in his seeming hiddenness and in true Foucauldian fashion, must not appear “as the arbitrary effect of a human power” but assume “the form of a natural sequence” (105)—acting, in accordance with the progression of these three authors from one of their key and immediate literary influences, more in line with a *naturalistic* force than a human force. It is, in fact, part of the slightly less active and direct alternative to forcefully maintaining the norms of the status quo—what Foucault calls the “discipline-

¹⁶This maintaining of the Norm is in accordance with Memmi’s third major ideological component of colonialism. For the sake of unity, I will include the first two as well in quoting him: “one, the gulf between the culture of the colonialist and the colonized; two, the exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonialist; three, the use of these supposed differences *as standards of absolute fact*” (71, italics added).

mechanism” (vs. the more obvious, confrontational option of the “discipline-blockade”¹⁷), which must “improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come [...] from a schema of exceptional discipline to one of generalized surveillance” (209). This panoptic system can be seemingly egalitarian, but one supported by “those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian” (222); the subtlety of its machinations creates an illusion of softness and leniency, even fairness. This new system of slavery can be so seemingly gentle in its coercion as to produce oblivious subjects—ones unaware, or at least not completely or consciously aware, that they are slaves—in the case of black migrants, too close to the slaves of the old South for comfort.

However, there is another side to the populace’s internalization of panopticism’s effects: their gradual—often *very* gradual—coming into awareness of it, which produces a subliminal brand of terror akin to Freud’s “uncanny,”¹⁸ often in the form of a gradually increasing paranoia. Given the New Overseer’s seeming omnipresence, one wonders who his agents are, thus rendering all glances—from friend, foe, and stranger alike—suspect. The dominant power structure works, then, as a “network of gazes” (171). But the subject’s dawning paranoia is ever kept at bay, just on the brink of conscious acknowledgment, by his/her own insistent denial; and this is the key to *normalization*—rather, the Panopticon’s institutional implementation of “normalizing judgment” (183), or the “power of the Norm” (184). Normalization maximizes the efficiency of panopticism, creating the sort of self-preserving and opportunistic prejudice within the populace necessary for its self-separation; the key to normalization, then, is to trick the

¹⁷According to Foucault, the discipline-blockade works within “the enclosed institution, [is] established on the edges of society, [and is] turned inward toward negative functions: arresting evil, breaking communications, suspending time” (*Discipline* 209).

¹⁸That term so virtually synonymous with the gothic, defined by Freud as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (930), the recognized resurfacing of something repressed that arouses dread and horror.

powerless into doing the work of the powerful, to make it easier for those in power to find those whose interests are the most contrary to theirs—those with the least power, the most marginalized; and, therefore, those who pose the greatest threat. The “normalizing gaze,” or the “examination,” then, acts as “a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish” (184), and provides the unit making up what Foucault calls the “great carceral continuum”—the extension of the hegemony’s disciplinary power to punish “from the penal institution to the entire social body” (297), creating a “carceral archipelago” in which it is possible “to pass naturally from disorder to offence and back from a transgression of the law to a slight departure from a rule, an average, a demand, a norm” (298). Through normalization, after internalization, the panoptic exercise of hegemonic power becomes not only tolerated, but expected, even correct, the “level from which it becomes natural and acceptable to be punished” lowered by the “universality of the carceral” (303).

But what is perhaps the most diabolically ingenious aim of the dominant culture’s panopticism is something hit upon by Homi Bhabha in his The Location of Culture—that the awareness, especially the conspicuous awareness, itself of the mechanisms of panoptic surveillance can become a target of marginalization; the subject (the slave) who demonstrates a consciousness of his being such is the greatest Other:

Forms of social and psychic alienation and aggression—madness, self-hate, treason, violence—can never be acknowledged as determinate and constitutive conditions of civil authority, or as the ambivalent effects of the social instinct itself. They are always explained away as alien presences, occlusions of historical progress, the ultimate misrecognition of Man. (61-62)

The black subject (referring back to the Hegelian dynamic) becomes alienated within his own community, with the white master counting on the subject's fellow slaves' wish to not be made conscious of their plight, of how miserable their lives have been made by a master who they cannot locate and directly confront (like Douglass). Within their sense of powerlessness in the face of the master's seeming omnipresence and omnipotence, the fellow slaves of a protagonist such as Bigger Thomas or Cross Damon (from Wright's The Outsider) tend to abandon their peer out of an urgent refusal to dwell on injustices that they have no power to right, if not more directly and violently push him/her away; consciousness of their slave status is the "dialectical real [...] apprehended as unwelcome" (69) described by Jacques Lacan in his Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The result is a self-policing born of self-preservation on the part of the subjects under surveillance, making any Norm-averting troublemakers more conspicuous and easy to locate by the white hegemony's disciplinary power. White panopticism's power has become so internalized by the subjects upon whom it is acting that they become complicit in their own surveillance and judgment; they have quite thoroughly accepted the "lactification" (29) described by Franz Fanon in his Black Skin, White Masks—that is, the desire to be white—and its ensuing "affective erethism" (41), Fanon's term for the inferiority complex born of wanting white admission, part of the "tripod" of anxiety, aggression, and devaluation of self (54).

In the case of black migrants, and African-Americans in general, the dominant white culture must criminalize, pathologize, and altogether Other-ize—all in order to *externalize*—any living symbol which poses a threat to its power or inspires in it any self-conscious historical guilt. It is as Fanon says, "The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me [...] I am *fixed*" (95)—and one of the most reliable and effective fixation tools of urban white panopticism is *ghettoization*, which will be much further discussed in Chapter Two, but certainly merits a

brief explanation here. According to Foucault, if “discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space,” then this distribution would certainly require “*enclosure* [...] the protected place of disciplinary monotony” (141). Both the separation and concentration effects of the ghetto make for a veritable crucible of the white panoptic effects—the categorization, internalization, normalization, otherization, and “affective erethism” already discussed. And out of the crucible of the ghetto comes another refined tool of white panopticism consistent with Foucault’s ideas, a further means of recruiting both extension of its surveillance powers and diversion of attention from those surveillance powers—*delinquency*. Coerced within panopticism’s power to punish and granted a few relieving steps away from his crushing marginalization, the delinquent becomes a new kind of slave, one that provides testimony to the hegemony’s economy and shrewdness: “The ideal would be for the convict to appear as a sort of rentable property: a slave at the service of all. Why would society eliminate a life and a body that it could appropriate?” (Discipline109).

As part of the “penitentiary technique,” the delinquent becomes the New Overseer’s tool of diversionary illegality—“a politically or economically less dangerous—and, on occasion, usable—form of illegality” (277). Foucault discusses at length the delinquent’s usefulness “in relation to other illegalities” (279)—the greater, systematic, institutional crimes perpetrated by the isolated and insular ruling class, “dedicated to a violent criminality, of which the poorer classes are often the first victims, hemmed in on every side by the police, exposed to long prison sentences, followed by a permanently ‘specialized’ life” (279). Out of these targeted poorer classes comes delinquency, though which the “alien, dangerous and often hostile world” of the ruling class “obstructs or at least maintains at a sufficiently low level everyday illegal practices (petty thefts, minor acts of violence, routine acts of law-breaking)” (279). Delinquency, then, is

a controlled illegality, an agent for the illegality of the dominant groups, and thus represents “a diversion of illegality for the illicit circuits of profit and power of the dominant class” (280). The delinquent is no outlaw—that is, outside of the law; he is, as Foucault says, “from the very outset, in the law, at the very heart of the law [...] an institutional product” (301). He may be one of many “informers, police spies, strike-breakers,” but his diversionary function is always the same: “to maintain the hostility of the poorer classes to delinquents” (285) and not the dominant classes who are the true orchestrating criminal masterminds, using the subjects’ own sense of inferiority and self-loathing to isolate crime “as a monstrosity and to depict it as the work of the poorest class” (289).

The hierarchization and doubling of the delinquency born of marginalization and ghettoization can become quite complicated and intricate—a grand and discombobulating system of overseers working for other overseers who likely are not even aware that they are working towards someone else’s ends. Again, this will be discussed and examined more extensively in the next chapter, which is devoted almost exclusively to Richard Wright’s work—with black criminals, black intellectuals, and Communists of both races serving as scapegoats and patsies for much more powerful and elusive institutional powers representing the dominant white culture. What the works of Wright, Petry, and Ellison demonstrate, however, is a working through and a working towards a new counter-strategy on the part of the new slave. In the spirit of Gilroy’s description of Douglass’ story as “metanarrative,”¹⁹ a big part of this strategy would have to be authorial, stylistic.

III. A Terribly Honest Reaction

¹⁹See the top of page 7.

With 4,500 copies sold in the first 5 months of its existence and repeated reissues in America, followed then by English, Irish, and French editions, the Narrative of Frederick Douglass was, as William L. Andrews says in To Tell a Free Story, “the great enabling text of the first century of Afro-American autobiography” (138). Andrews also sees a change in tone and choice of details when comparing Douglass’ Narrative and My Bondage and My Freedom; consider this passage from My Bondage and My Freedom, in which Douglass hints at justifying slaves’ murder of their masters:

The slaveholder, kind or cruel, is a slaveholder still—the every hour violator of the just and inalienable rights of man; and he is, therefore, every hour silently whetting the knife of vengeance for his own throat. He never lisps a syllable in commendation of the fathers of this republic, nor denounces any attempted oppression of himself, without inviting the knife to his own throat, and asserting the rights of rebellion for his own slaves. (197)

The implicit threat in this passage anticipates the audacity which Wright, Petry, Ellison, and their successors would embrace so wholeheartedly almost a century later. But the motivation behind this new and shocking tone comes not only from his direct experience of oppression from slaveholders and overseers, but also from the political censorship placed upon him by his abolitionist colleagues, which would lead to his eventual breaking with them.

Between the Narrative and My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass was coming off a triumphal British speaking tour and experiencing opposition from abolitionists to his wanting to start an antislavery weekly paper (To Tell 214). As Andrews points out:

Douglass learned early that abolitionists had an old-fashioned prejudice against letting an ex-slave comment freely on the significance of his experience as he

narrated the facts of his life [...] In a society as hostile to blacks as the North was in the 1840s, an ex-slave who hoped for a good sale of his narrative was not likely to embarrass his white sponsors or contradict his audience's expectations by talking about slavery or himself in an unsanctioned manner. (107-109)

Having become something of an outsider whose interests, as it turned out, lay apart from both those of proslavery forces and those of both black and white antislavery forces, Douglass found himself at a crossroads in the early 1850s. And his decision to use a new approach in My Bondage and My Freedom reflects a more complete embracing of what Andrews presents as three sources for the authority that justifies the black man's "declaration of independence": "(1) the act of having claimed it"; "(2) his allegiance to the self rather than to the other, the reader"; and "(3) his definition of truth and falsehood as that which is consistent with intuitive perception and needs, not as absolute standards" (103). Given the emergence of a new slavery with a new white panopticism, African-American authors of the twentieth century would have to embrace these as well—to rediscover the authorial and stylistic strategies of literary presentation offered by the old slave narrative and apply them, with even more intensity, within the new contexts of African-American social realism and modernism.

So what is it that makes these three particular authors—Wright, Petry, and Ellison—so worthy of this focus? The obvious answers are not only their chronological proximity to each other, but also the significance of their mid-twentieth-century historical placement. All three experienced the tensions arising from the disparity between the national prosperity emerging from World War II and the continuing discrimination against black Americans—especially housing discrimination; as Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. bluntly sums up the sharp difference between civil rights legislation and abject living conditions for black people, "the promised land was a

slum” (33). These tensions would often erupt violently, especially in the form of race riots, and all three authors allude to race riots in their works: for example, Wright’s Jake Jackson recalls when black homes were being bombed during the Chicago race riots (Lawd Today! 172); Petry dedicates an entire short story, “In Darkness and Confusion,” to the 1943 Harlem riots; and the climactic conclusion of Invisible Man involves a race riot in Harlem. Such violent reactions are evidence of a perhaps keener awareness of a rigid social hierarchy founded on a highly rigged system of racial chauvinism and socioeconomic mobility. And such violence translated into literature takes the form of a long-earned and overdue “terrible honesty” on the part of mid-twentieth-century African-American authors like Wright, Petry, and Ellison.

In Terrible Honesty, Ann Douglas uses her titular phrase to encapsulate the generally brutal, irreverent, shocking, and iconoclastic attitude and aesthetics with which American modernist writing is so closely identified. She is quick to point out, however, how African-American writers of the early and “high” modernist period are an exception to the rule of “terrible honesty”:

The blazoning of truths that one’s society would prefer to deny is by definition an attention-grabbing, adversarial strategy, one most easily and effectively utilized by those whom society has no reason or desire to sacrifice, namely, its own chosen elite. The New Negro was a figure with few claims on mainline America’s attention, interest, or sympathy. If he insulted or displeased, he could be cut off, erased, without a thought or regret. (104)

For African-American modernist writers, especially those of the Harlem Renaissance, “terrible honesty” was obviously riskier and less politically feasible—not only when faced with white patronage and public perception, but also with Harlem Renaissance leaders and spokespersons

uncomfortable with a warts-and-all presentation of black life from a public relations standpoint. After the Harlem Renaissance's highpoint (the end of which was signaled by the 1929 stock market crash), however, Wright would prove to be far less cautious. His boldness harkens back to an initiative taken by African-American writers just before the Harlem Renaissance in the post-bellum, pre-Harlem period; as William L. Andrews points out in his introduction to The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, the leading characters in most African-American novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century "almost always have a choice between self-interest and self-sacrifice in the name of uplifting the race," and generally, the choice is in favor of the latter, with "usually, little soul-searching" (xviii). As Andrews elaborates, what these characters might think and say in the privacy of their own hearts and minds is simply not a priority: "Burdened by a sense of their own obligation to speak for black America to white American, early African-American novelists could not allow their characters the moral of turning inward. It was more important that they speak in public about public issues" (xviii). To varying degrees, Wright, Petry, and Ellison are all very much inside their respective protagonists' heads, with primacy placed on their sufferings as individuals not only at the hands of oppressive white forces, but often at the hands of other African-Americans who have variably internalized the dominant white culture's standards and norms.²⁰ To varying degrees, a big part of these authors' "terrible honesty" is directed not only at a potential white audience, but fellow African-Americans who might entrap them with a self-defensive, hyper-communal anti-individualism.

²⁰Interestingly, Robert M. Dowling points out a significance in the progression from Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods and Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man that seems to anticipate a similar relationship between Native Son and Invisible Man; if Dunbar's novel "tracks the naturalistic slippery slope of a guileless country boy who evolves from well-meaning son and brother to gambling addict, violent drunk, and murderer," Johnson's novel "catenates the steps of a talented vagabond who stumbles into Tenderloin life and is able to take something productive from his experience [...] and move on" (21). There are, after all, noticeable similarities between Dunbar's Joe Hamilton and Wright's Bigger Thomas (both are violent and murderous) and between Johnson's "ex-colored" man and Ellison's "invisible" man (both of whom are never named and engage in some form of tricksterism to negotiate their new urban environments).

In 1940, Native Son was published and became a best-seller, changing “American culture [...] forever,” according to Howe, making “impossible” a “repetition of the old lies” about the relationship and tensions between black and white Americans by bringing “out into the open [...] the hatred, fear and violence” felt by both and assaulting “the most cherished of American vanities: the hope that the accumulated injustice of the past would bring with it no penalties” (98). But the point of such risky narratives, ones that seem to confirm the worst racist stereotypes, is the anti-sentimentality which denies whites the consolation of romanticizing black urban plight and reacquaints them with their part in creating it; as Howe says of Native Son, Bigger is drawn “from white fantasy and white contempt” and is “the worst of Negro life accepted, then rendered a trifle conscious and thrown back at those who had made him what he [is]” (99). It is the monster confronting Dr. Frankenstein with the reality of its presence, through the medium of “terrible honesty” as a strategy against white panopticism and its methods of internalization and normalization; it is the strategy of the new slave narrative.

Fittingly, the candid artistic rendering of such open indignance, as well as an overall more confrontational tone and approach on the part of African-American authors, marks the seizing of a new initiative, a late-coming version of “terrible honesty,” for African-American literature in the modern era. And it all begins with Richard Wright and Native Son; he is the beginning of an audacity that would profoundly influence African-American writing even beyond Ellison. What makes Wright’s Native Son such a significant work is not simply that it was written by an African-American author; Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Frances E.W. Harper, and even Frederick Douglass, among others, had couched in gothic terms and tropes their written descriptions of the black migrant’s disillusionment upon arriving North and confronting the city. The crucial ingredient contributed by Wright is a

sustained, undisguised, and unflinchingly angry honesty; the gentle, polite approach was, for him, over. It simply no longer worked. James Baldwin perhaps explains it best in “Alas, Poor Richard,” from Nobody Knows My Name:

The violence is gratuitous and compulsive because the root of the violence is never examined. The root is rage. It is the rage, almost literally the howl, of a man who is being castrated [...] the great attention paid to the details of physical destruction reveal a terrible attempt to break out of the cage in which the American imagination has imprisoned him for so long. (188)

This calls to mind Hegel’s description of the fear which leads to the slave’s self-consciousness and self-realization: “In that experience [of fear] it [the slave-consciousness] has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations” (634). The first chapter of Native Son is, after all, called “Fear”; and in his artistic communication of the black subject’s fearful coming into consciousness of the truth within the master-slave relationship, Wright decides to be far from polite.

No matter what their reaction to Wright and Native Son, the African-American authors who would succeed him were undeniably affected and influenced; from contemporaries of Wright such as Petry, Ellison, and Baldwin, to later writers such as Baraka and Morrison, African-American literature after 1940—particularly in the tradition of American urban gothic literature—would be far different had Wright not been, according to Irving Howe, “courageous enough to release the full weight of his anger” (99), the anger from which Margaret Walker says his “daemonic genius” (53) springs forth. It was the “Native Son effect—really the Bigger Thomas effect,” as Lawrence P. Jackson calls it in The Indignant Generation, that “stimulated an enormous growth in consciousness in American audiences and publishers. The black critics

could not help but want Bigger to smash the lurid stereotype of Uncle Tom and Aunt Dinah, which they found insulting. Bigger did replace the stereotype of Uncle Tom, and his brand of devil-may-care activism quickly made the techniques of patient black social uplift and the journals that carried the theme [...] outdated” (125). And it was all so deliberate, an antagonistic reaction—the seed of which was planted by a letter from the First Lady Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt in which she enthusiastically praised and described her mawkish, “unhappy” response to Wright’s far more safe and sentimental Uncle Tom’s Children; he knew, as Constance Webb describes, that “when people could *cry* and feel *sorry* they rid themselves of the necessity for action, for trying to change the conditions under which black people lived” (168). Hence the sadistic joy with which Wright presented Native Son; as Walker recounts of his describing the book to her just before its publication: “He said, ‘Yes, I think it will shock people, and I love to shock people.’ He grinned gleefully and rubbed his hands together in anticipation” (124). Wright was downright giddy to finally have forsaken heroism, romance, and sentimentality in his presentation of the black urban condition—“how a black underprivileged male in white American society truly feels” (Walker 148). And he had foreshadowed this new level of honesty three years before Native Son’s publication with his “Blueprint for Negro Writing” essay, in which he draws a stark contrast between most of the African-American writing of the past—“enter[ing] the Court of Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was no inferior,” only to be “received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks” (1381)—versus what he saw as called for in the present. Through his fiction, Wright, as Memmi would say, is taking the bolder of the “two historically possible solutions” at the colonized subject’s disposal when confronted with colonial oppression—“to reconquer all the dimensions which colonization tore away from him,” as opposed to assimilation (120). The very

fact that white panoptic oppression has not ceased but has actually evolved since the Emancipation is, again, proof of the colonizer's desperate insatiability and the self-destructively vicious cycle in which he finds himself. As the threat against the existence of oppression increases, the more oppression itself increases, and the more the colonizing/enslaving force needs justification through debasing the colonized population; as Memmi concludes, this engine of colonialism will inevitably burn itself out through the colonized's ultimate revolt: "The more he [the colonizer] must debase the colonized, the more guilty he feels, the more he must justify himself, etc. How can he emerge from this increasingly explosive circle except by rupture, explosion?" (128). The unprecedented shock that Native Son provides is that very rupture and explosion in a literary context.

The chief vehicle for Wright's newer, more honest presentation is Bigger Thomas, the anti-Uncle Tom, who takes away from liberal whites the consolation of guilt and replaces it with a far more arresting, unsettling, and demanding truth—that underprivileged black Americans, if not all black Americans, as Howe states, "were far from patient or forgiving, [...] were scarred by fear, [...] hated every moment of their suppression even when seeming most acquiescent, and [...] often enough [...] hated *us*, the decent and cultivated white men who from complicity or neglect shared in the responsibility for their plight" (98-99). This element of warning in Bigger leads to another aspect of Wright's work that separates him from other, earlier African-American literary renderings of black urban hardship: in presenting Bigger Thomas to the white public as the culmination of all of their racist suspicions and guilty fears, he also makes Bigger representative of *all* black people who have suffered the discrimination and institutional violence of their urban migration experience; Wright seems to relishingly exploit whites' fear of not only individual but also collective black violence—of an imminent uprising, or a revolution. McKay,

again, certainly proposed violence in his poem “If We Must Die”—“And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!”—years before Wright, but the motive for that violence is purely defensive and given a heroic, underdog sense of pathos and romanticism: “If we must die, let it not be like hogs [...] O let us nobly die [...] Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (970) Then there is the combative language used by W.E.B. DuBois in The Souls of Black Folk to describe his aspirations for rising into the social acceptance and success usually reserved for whites: “But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would *wrest from them*” (italics added), even though his true ends were nonviolent—“by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head” (38). But there is no such heroism or ultimate nonviolence with Bigger, with either his unintentional killing of Mary Dalton or the deliberate rape and killing of his girlfriend Bessie—nor is that heroism present with the vast majority of Wright’s other protagonists, for that matter, such as the cheating and wife-beating Jake Jackson of Lawd Today! or the ultimate surrender and self-betrayal of Fred Daniels in “The Man Who Lived Underground.”²¹ The violence of Wright’s protagonists seems much more direct and instigating; the distance, elusiveness, and wide institutional dissemination of the discrimination perpetrated against American black migrants makes their in-fact reactionary violence appear more like a first blow. Expanded to the collective, historical level, this smacks of a long overdue and long in-the-making payback—the apocalypse and judgment day that haunts the collective white American psyche and serves as the foundation for its guilt over past sins and its compensatory sentimentality.

Wright specifically warns of the dangers in the “paternalistic attitude of whites” toward blacks in a 1945 Town Meeting radio debate, “Are We Solving America’s Race Problem?” being the topic. He says that white paternalism “lulls whites into feelings of dangerous complacency

²¹First published in 1942, two years after Native Son.

about rising racial tensions,” that whites “can no longer regard Negroes as a passive, obedient minority,” that the choice between “a violent or a peaceful solution [...] depends upon the degree to which white Americans can purge their minds of the illusions that they own and know Negroes,” and that unless white Americans “pry their minds out of their horse-and-buggy ways [...] violence may be upon us” (75). Startlingly direct as these statements may be, they reveal and remind of the American concern in Wright’s *African-Americanness*; inescapably American himself, he too has an interest in a peaceful resolution (or at least an ultimately positive one); the gravity and strength of his warnings show how, contrary to white American opinion, he does not want American society to crumble as a result of its racial fissures either. Fred Daniels’ “cold dread at the thought of the actions he knew he would perform” if he resurfaces in “The Man Who Lived Underground” comes to mind (1439).

However, Wright continues to disturb by hinting at the uncomfortable reminder that, in American history, violent revolution has often been necessary for cultural transition. This resulting uneasiness defines the African-American urban gothic tradition in the “school” of Wright. It haunts the works of his immediately-influenced contemporaries as well as his successors decades later; regardless of how they felt about Wright’s work and how they reacted to it, these other African-American writers are far less cautious about representing black anger and hatred toward whites, as well as the potential for an outbreak of violence, than black authors who had come before Wright. Take Petry’s The Street, published only six years after Native Son, for example. Lutie Johnson, who hates white people and blames them directly for her poverty and failed marriage, has a premonition of a full-blown riot after seeing a smashed store front: “She walked past, thinking that it was like a war that hadn’t got off to a start yet, though both sides were piling up ammunition and reserves and were now waiting for anything, any little

excuse, a gesture, a word, a sudden loud noise—and pouf! it would start” (200). Violence also seems to be the only remedy for Lutie’s anger after Mr. Crosse offers professional singing lessons for sex instead of money; she welcomes the “roar” of the “lurching, swaying” train, wishing it would “go faster, make more noise, rock more wildly” (322). Later, Lutie’s son Bub overhears an old black man say, “The trouble with colored folks is they ain’t got no gumption. They ought to let white folks know they ain’t going to keep putting up with their nonsense” (341). Then there is Amiri Baraka, who would up the ante of Wright’s brazenness with far more undisguised and openly confrontational language, referring to white liberal sentimentality and denial by white people of their historical oppression of black people as “the propaganda of devils that they are not devils” in The System of Dante’s Hell (154) and beckoning white patrons toward their deaths in “The Revolutionary Theatre”²²: “WHITE BUSINESSMEN OF THE WORLD, DO YOU WANT TO SEE PEOPLE REALLY DANCING AND SINGING??? ALL OF YOU GO UP TO HARLEM AND GET YOURSELF KILLED. THERE WILL BE DANCING AND SINGING, THEN, FOR REAL!” (1901) And “Violent” Violet’s attempted mutilation of Dorcas’ corpse for sleeping with her husband Joe in Toni Morrison’s Jazz appears to be the result of all of her past suffering and suppression; owning her violence, she says, “*that* Violet is me! The me that hauled hay in Virginia and handled a four-mule team in the brace [...] stood in cane fields in the middle of the night when the sound of it rustling hid the slither of the snakes and I stood still waiting for him [Joe] [...] the welts given me by a two-tone peckerwood because I was late in the field row the next morning” (96). Clearly, post-Wright African-American literature was more daring in its airing of historical and sociological grievances. It was as though the floodgates of angry racial protest in literature were not only opened, but demolished.

²²Both works by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka were first published in 1965.

Obviously, this provocative edge gives Wright and his successors a curious place within American literature; they are both defined by and rebelling against their white canonical “colleagues.” Unavoidably influenced by them, they pay begrudging homage while revising and reacting to their ideas and tropes through various intertextual variations and inversions. The tension and angst felt by their protagonists, beginning with Wright’s *Bigger Thomas*, are but creative extensions of the same uneasiness they feel as black people who also happen to be American writers. Within America, like their fictional creations, they are both victim and inheritor, and their art reflects a coming to grips with that fact. At the heart of their authorial strategies, however, is what Louis S. Gross describes as the African-American writer’s dilemma—“how to write within an oppressive cultural context without becoming either a cultural lapdog, or even more insidiously, to somehow support the culture which relegates you to the status of Other by defining you as the lack or absence of something within the dominant culture” (65). This potential for internalizing and becoming complicit in one’s own cultural relegation is a significant risk for African-American authors, especially those who employ the gothic in an urban context; Wright presents *Bigger*, according to Ellison, as a “near-subhuman indictment of white oppression [...] designed to shock whites out of their apathy” (“The World and the Jug” 162), yet, as Thomas Heise points out, such depictions run the obvious risk of “merely confirm[ing] white fears and fantasies, rather than to deconstruct the politics” (129).

Similarly, Wright’s depiction of working-class black people in *Lawd Today!*, for example, is far from flattering, if not outright self-loathing (the novel’s original title was *Cesspool*), and he seems to go out of his way to present individual black characters as ugly and unpleasant; Jake’s palms are “dingy” (5), his “fat black feet” spread “like cobraheads upon the carpet,” his face is “round as a full moon’ and “an oily expanse of blackness,” “flabby pouches”

hang under his “two cunning eyes,” the nostrils of his “broad nose” gape “militantly frontward like the barrels of a shotgun,” he has big lips that droop and tremble as he walks, has a big roll of neck fat, he has “sticky and greasy” hair (9), and his wife calls him “black and evil” (13). And the novel ends on a violent and unresolved note, with the city’s (Chicago’s) icy wind “whining and moaning like an idiot in a deep *black* pit” (219, italics added), complementing the eerily quiet aftermath of a domestic altercation in which Jake’s wife has defensively slashed him across the head with a jagged piece of windowpane. The point, however, as will be further discussed in the next chapter, the point is not uncomplicated self-loathing, but of how the degradation perpetrated by the panoptic forces of the dominant white culture reduces its black subjects to a seemingly uncivilized and even subhuman level that reaffirms by example the dominant culture’s supposed superiority.

Wright stands apart in terms of the previous African-American literary presentation of the urban landscape, for as much as Claude McKay presented the hardships of black people in the urban setting of Home to Harlem, that novel still retains a significant portion of the romance and glamour that Wright argued was a guilty white invention for black urban life. Take, for instance, Jake’s love and eventual reunion and departure with the prostitute Felice, who comes to sexually embody the same helpless and conflicted attraction Jake feels toward the city of Harlem; and Ray’s love/hate relationship with Harlem—“Its brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, oh, the rich blood-red color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its ‘blues’ and the improvised surprises of its jazz” (Home to Harlem 267). Here, McKay’s urban state of mind is akin to Sandburg’s sober but dignified depiction of the heroism of the lower, working classes (in “Chicago,” “Happiness,” “Muckers,” and “Jack,” for instance, all from his Chicago Poems).

Wright himself sounds rather Sandburg-esque in his introduction to Black Metropolis, speaking of Chicago in darkly sentimental terms, as “that city so deadly dramatic and stimulating” in which he “caught whispers of the meanings that life could have” (xvii); yet he would transcend Sandburg *and* McKay by forsaking dignity and heroism virtually altogether, flirting with stereotype and stripping Bigger down to a rage-filled and inarticulate brute incapable of such romantic and bittersweet complexity and, therefore, a more startling revelation of the anger, resentment, and disillusionment felt by black urban migrants. Bigger is a warning, that no African-American exists, according to James Baldwin, “who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull” and is “compelled to accept the fact that this dark and dangerous and unloved stranger is part of himself forever” (“Many Thousands Gone” 1669).

The purpose of this opening chapter is to provide the context for and the criteria by which the following chapters will examine the progression—from Wright, to Petry, to Ellison—of each author’s presentation of white panopticism and its effects on their protagonists (and other characters, for that matter). This will involve a thorough explanation of three concepts that are key to understanding the authors’ motives and placement within American literature: panopticism as a change of strategy on the part of the master within his relationship to his slave, white panopticism’s basis within Foucauldian social theory, and “terrible honesty” as a reactionary strategy on the part of African-American authors. Chapter Two will address Richard Wright as the first move away from Dreiser-esque naturalism, with a focus on environmental racism and housing discrimination. Chapter Three will address Ann Petry with an emphasis on its revisiting of the Jacobs narrative and its heavy-handed use of classical gothic clichés to reveal a more truly horrifying, real-life conclusion. Chapter Four will address Ralph Ellison’s work as

the fulfillment of the “new” slave narrative’s rediscovery of the Douglass-esque triumph. The concluding chapter will further explain why a “new” slave narrative was needed and touch upon the influence of these three crucial writers on later African-American literature from the likes of James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Morrison.

Chapter Two: “Beyond Naturalism”

The mid-twentieth century works of Wright, Petry, and Ellison mark the much-needed second coming of the slave narrative—a new narrative for a new kind of slavery. The influence of early-twentieth century urban naturalism²³ provided the means of formulating that new narrative, the springboard from which they (especially Wright) would launch their own protest-driven “terribly honest” works. However, to clarify and examine the development of the works of these three authors from naturalism and to contextualize its function as a new kind of slave narrative for the twentieth century, one must identify the new and more tangible (and thus less naturalistic) source, mechanism, and strategies of the oppressive forces—in this case, in the form of the New Overseer and slaveowners of the new plantation that is the northern urban landscape. Also, one must identify the reactionary strategies that define the agency which separates the likes of Bigger from a more typically naturalistic character—in other words, what makes him “terrible.”

Protest is certainly not absent from the pathos-inspiring helplessness of typical naturalistic protagonists, especially those of Theodore Dreiser, but all three authors introduce two new ingredients: a tangible, locatable, and human source for all of the supposed “forces” acting upon the protagonists, and a new and real sense of agency on the part of those

²³This includes not only white authors such as Dreiser and Crane, but post-bellum, pre-Harlem black antecedents such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson. As William L. Andrews points out in his introduction to *The Sport of the Gods*, African-American writers of Dunbar and Johnson’s era recognized both the usefulness in naturalism’s “honest portrayal of the human condition as one of struggle against an indifferent or hostile environment” and naturalism’s troubling tendency “to minimize or dismiss individual will and human reason as effective means of changing one’s environment or fate” (viii). The key difference between these post-bellum, pre-Harlem writers and Wright, Petry, and Ellison is the varying degrees of agency afforded to the protagonists of the three latter authors.

protagonists. To put it another way, Wright, Petry, and Ellison's protagonists are not as helpless as those of, say, Dreiser. And since the forces acting upon them are less mysterious and more malicious than those of typical naturalism, there is at least the possibility of their fighting back. Of course, Bigger Thomas still loses in the end, defeated by the forces of the dominant white culture working against him. But the terror that he inspires through violence and audacity, again, defines his "terrible honesty" as a character, both in terms of his involvement in the plot and as evidence of the grave and personal grievances on the part of his creator, Richard Wright. Furthermore, this terrible agency marks that first division and departure from urban naturalism.

It is both convenient and important to note that Wright in particular was especially influenced by Dreiser. As Wright documents in Black Boy, reading the works of Dreiser had made a lasting impression:

I grew silent, wondering about the life around me. It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these 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, and I could not read enough of them. (250)

Wright was certainly familiar with other arguably naturalist American writers, such as Frank Harris and Stephen Crane (Black Boy 249), but Dreiser was his introduction and perhaps most poignant influence. It makes sense, then, that Wright's works, more so than those of Petry and Ellison, would most closely resemble those of Dreiser. What Dreiser's brand of urban naturalism introduced to Wright was the realization that the forces that seem to arbitrarily determine the fates of certain unfortunate souls in the city are, in fact, socioeconomic in nature; the drives and ambitions of both Bigger Thomas and Clyde Griffiths, the protagonist of Dreiser's

An American Tragedy,²⁴ are shaped by the pressures of American socioeconomic inequality and the illusion of the American Dream, with Bigger and Clyde both working from positions of disadvantage.²⁵ For Dreiser, the supposedly equal opportunity for all Americans to achieve economic independence is a “mirage” (An American Tragedy 24) borne of the romance of personal freedom that the American Dream engenders. Nonetheless, the less fortunate positions in which Dreiser characters such as Clyde and Caroline “Sister Carrie”²⁶Meeber find themselves make them vulnerable to the hopeful, pie-in-the-sky aspirations of American capitalism and materialism, which lead them to their respective calamitous and disillusioning ends. Such descriptions as Carrie’s feeling like a “wisp on the tide” (25) in the huge business district of Chicago and the painful discrepancy that Clyde feels between his uncle’s magnificent house in Lycurgus and his squalid room on Thorpe Street (191-192)—as well as the disturbing topography of Lycurgus, in which Clyde sees the occasional “miserable slum” among factory after factory (191)—help to illustrate how, for Dreiser, the “mysterious” forces of naturalism are, then, not so mysterious after all, but the result of the characters’ desperation within a system that is rigged against them.

²⁴First published in 1925, An American Tragedy is the story of how the poor, young, and immature but ambitious Clyde Griffiths tries to make it in the big city, first in Chicago and then in Lycurgus, New York, through his connection to his rich uncle. In maintaining two romantic relationships, one with the poor farm girl and factory worker Roberta Alden and the other with the much richer Sondra Finchley, Clyde gets Roberta pregnant. Feeling that her insistence on not getting an abortion and his marrying her threatens his more advantageous future with Sondra, Clyde takes Roberta on a rowboat to a remote area and murders her by hitting her in the face with his camera and letting her drown after the boat capsizes (though the narrative is perhaps deliberately unclear as to whether Clyde acted instinctively or with malice). Once found out, Clyde is imprisoned and executed.

²⁵As Richard Lehan writes, Dreiser would “always distrust democracy, believing that the wealthy still had the privileges of the old aristocracy and that the poor had never found their sense of place” (18).

²⁶First published in 1900, Sister Carrie is the story of how young country girl Caroline “Carrie” Meeber comes to Chicago to live with her poor sister, then (fed up with the sister’s poverty) moves in with the much more promising Charles Drouet, who eventually gets her the acting job that will blossom into a very lucrative career. Along the way, she also begins a relationship with the (unhappily) married bar owner George Hurstwood. Out of his infatuation for Carrie, Hurstwood embezzles (again, like Clyde’s murder of Roberta in An American Tragedy, ambiguously) a large sum of money from the safe at his bar, leading to his running off with Carrie to New York, her gradual dissatisfaction with him, his financial ruin, and suicide. Given the obvious gender significance of Caroline Meeber (as opposed to Clyde Griffiths), Sister Carrie will play a more extensive comparative role in the next chapter, which is devoted to the works of Ann Petry.

Indeed, in Black Boy, Wright speaks of his first arrival in Chicago in naturalistic terms, showing again the strong influence of Dreiser and other naturalist writers, wondering if he would ever learn the “strange laws” by which “this machine-city” was governed (262). And one can see the influence of Dreiser in the chapter design of Native Son—“Fear,” “Flight,” and “Fate.” From the beginning, Bigger’s path seems fixed, and he feels this seeming inevitability vaguely, trying in vain to keep it at bay, living in reference to both his family and himself behind “a wall, a curtain” (10) just as Clyde feels shut out by the city’s tall walls. But from “Fear” to “Flight,” with the accidental killing of Mary behind him, his “crime” seems “natural” to him, and he feels that “all of his life had been leading to something like this” (106). Finally, to “Fate,” he knows that “something like this just had to be” (358). In spite of the hopelessness of the socioeconomic condition imposed upon him because of his race, Bigger is nonetheless tortured by the vain hopes engendered by the false promises of the supposedly equal opportunity within the American Dream, as well as the tentacles of its Anglo-centric popular culture. As Boris Max, Bigger’s defense attorney, explains during Bigger’s trial for the murder of Mary Dalton, the “alluring” and “dazzling” aspects of the mere physical aspect of the American urban landscape, along with its advertisements, radios, newspapers and movies, “dangle within easy reach of everyone the fulfillment of happiness” (394). However, these aspects are, in fact, merely “tokens of mockery” and “daily taunts” to those who will never possess what this environment offers; as Boris sums up what apparently creates a Bigger Thomas, “Imagine a man walking amid such a scene, a part of it, and yet knowing that it is *not* for him! (Native Son 394). Bigger’s crimes are then the result of a rage borne of being denied what was initially and tantalizingly promised as an equal and universal opportunity for social mobility and economic success. The perfect metaphor for this frustration born of exclusion is Bigger’s masturbating in

the movie theater, in which he is bombarded by the images and standards of white popular culture (especially those images and standards concerning female trophy-beauty) via its movies, as well as its newsreels. As Boris further explains, “His entire existence was one long craving for satisfaction, with the objects of satisfaction denied” (402).

For a working-class African-American such as Bigger, the mockery of which Boris speaks in a general sense is felt much more keenly; thus, with Wright’s works we see a specifically *racial* trajectory from naturalistic forces. And within the concentration of this new racial specificity, the “forces” for Wright become less elusive and more human—the “forces” are created by the white hegemony and its culture; these “forces” are, in fact, white *people*, as Bigger and other working-class black migrants seem to conclude.²⁷ To Bigger and many other African-American migrants, “white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s feet in the dark” (114). And the result of these white “forces” of the urban North is the ghettoization of black migrants—the ghetto being the factory-space for the concentration and cultural indoctrination of those black migrants to ensure the white power structure’s perpetuity, for the central import of the tragedy of Bigger Thomas is how he, even in his apparent rebellion and move toward individual agency, is in fact a product, a tool, and a casualty of the New Overseer’s strategies of acculturation and internalization. In spite of this, one can see in even the bleak example of Bigger the beginnings of a successful move toward

²⁷To begin with, perhaps even before their realization of the continued racism that they will face in the North, African-American migrants from the South have the “time rush” (Heise 140) of migration to negotiate. From slavery to freedom, from rural to urban, and from agrarian to industrial, the tasks of acclimation and acculturation are dauntingly multiple and compounded. Added to this are what Heise describes as “the more insidious and often invisible machinations of northern racism” (139), with segregation being the chief tool for marginalization in the new urban sphere, combining “race and space” in the inner cities and threatening to specifically reduce the black inhabitant to a criminal stereotype.

self-realization that transcends the sense of fated inevitability posed by naturalism. Even in its bleakness, Native Son is thus less bleak than naturalism.

I. *When Images Come to Life, Forces Become Human*

An obvious conclusion to black migrants' inescapable sense of white hegemony in the city environment is one that reaches paranoid and conspiratorial proportions, yet seems all too real—the idea of a panoptic mastermind or master-organization watching your every move and controlling everything that happens to you. This more modern, urban take on the plantation owners and overseers of the previous centuries appears in Wright's fiction, especially in Native Son. The overseeing forces working against Bigger Thomas come in the form of a single man. Very early in Native Son, Bigger sees a poster of Buckley,²⁸ the State's Attorney who ultimately puts him away for murder, and “the white face”—not *a*, but *the* white face—of Buckley on the poster appears to be addressing Bigger specifically: Buckley's hand is uplifted with the index finger pointing straight at the onlooker, and above the top of the poster are tall red letters reading, “YOU CAN'T WIN!” (13) This resulting sense of God-like ubiquity is seen again when Buckley interrogates Bigger in person; he knows virtually everything about Bigger, everything he's ever done. He seems to be the human avatar of the overwhelming snow, the virtual blizzard which, in its insistent and omnipresent whiteness, serves as, according to James Smethurst, “a powerful metaphor for a system of supervision and control and its effect on the black subject” (34). Notice, for instance, how the presence of the snow intensifies upon the

²⁸The Buckley poster in particular calls to mind the mysterious yet ominous billboard of the optician Doctor T.J. Eckleburg overlooking the “valley of ashes” in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. Much like how Buckley has an uncanny knowledge of Bigger's crimes and whereabouts, the adulterous drama among Tom Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson, and George Wilson appears to unfold “under Doctor Eckleburg's persistent stare” (24). Later, George tells his co-worker Michaelis what he told his cheating wife Myrtle: “God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing [...] God sees everything” (159). While saying this, George is staring at the Dr. Eckleburg billboard. But unlike the figure on the billboard, Bigger eventually meets Buckley in the flesh, and Buckley proves to be just as all-seeing and all-knowing as his campaign posters lead to believe.

detectives' discovery of Mary Dalton's remains in the family furnace, the event leading up to Bigger's discovery and capture; Bigger runs upstairs and jumps out of the window of his room, "sailing through the snow" before violently landing and feeling himself "buried in a cold pile of snow," with snow "in his mouth, eyes, ears [and] seeping down his back" (220)—and after he is finally knocked off of the water tank by the fire-hoses, Bigger is dragged through the snow by his feet, then two officers "placed a foot on each of his wrists, making them sink deep down in the snow" after stretching his arms out "as though about to crucify him" (270). It is as though he is a sacrificial, messianic tribute to the snow and the power that it represents.

Mr. Dalton too, by virtue of Bigger's hearing his name during the movie theater's newsreel, "comes to life" as an actual presence for Bigger—in fact, as Bigger's landlord and employer. Before Bigger goes to work for him, Mr. Dalton "was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god" (174). Although less ominous or obviously malicious than Buckley, the reach of his influence as owner of the South Side Real Estate Company makes him a crucial part of the bigger problems of housing discrimination and urban segregation—problems that lead to Bigger's criminal behavior and make the panoptic services of the scarier Buckley necessary in the first place. Those like Mr. Dalton, then, are ultimately responsible for creating the playground, the arena, on which the white panopticism of a Buckley can function: the ghetto created by environmental racism, the new plantation for the new slavery black migrants find in the North. Sylvia Hood Washington contextualizes this very well in her work in Chicago from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. According to Washington, the history preceding the sound of the alarm clock which begins Native Son is this: The Black Belt of Chicago was essentially created by the fire of 1874, which burned continuously for twenty-four hours and consumed forty-seven acres and over eight hundred

buildings, destroying about eighty-five percent of the city's African-American-owned property. Half of the African-American families that survived the fire dispersed among white residences, while the other half concentrated in a long, thin strip of land between a well-to-do white neighborhood and that of the "shanty Irish." This "Black Belt" would be where most of Chicago's African-American residents and institutions would be located for the next several decades, and continued migration and white movement to the more "environmentally desirable" lake-front and suburban areas would lead to its expansion throughout the twentieth century. Multiple bombings from 1917 to 1921 were meant to discourage expansion, not only against the black residents themselves, but the real estate agents and bankers as well. Both black and white real estate speculators were not innocent in the matter either; both engaged in "block-busting," a lucrative profit-making scam that exploited both the racial fears of whites and the ignorance of the black migrants: vulnerable white homeowners would be scared into selling below market prices after being convinced that blacks had already "infiltrated" their communities, then the price would be marked up for black people willing to pay a premium for good-quality housing in ostensibly racially mixed neighborhoods. Encroachment upon white geographical spaces came from a continual influx of black migration from the South which reached its peak between 1940 and 1950.²⁹ And the circumstances which led to this concentrated confinement of black urban newcomers are not lost on Bigger in Native Son:

The rental agencies had told him that there were not enough houses for Negroes to live in, that the city was condemning houses in which Negroes lived as being too old and too dangerous for habitation. And he remembered the time when the police had come and driven him and his mother and his brother and sister out of a

²⁹All information concerning the history of Chicago's Black Belt is taken from Sylvia Hood Washington's Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865-1954. 139-146.

flat in a building which had collapsed two days after they had moved. And he had heard it said that black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kind of flats. (248)

Within this system of housing fraud and block-busting, what black migrants are actually getting at an outrageously expensive price are the whites' leftovers, the second-rate husks of a prejudicial retreat. The combination of this housing shortage and the continuing influx of black migrants is what makes the Black Belt so concentrated and suffocating, with its increasing population systematically (and often violently) on their side of "the line" (Native Son 21).³⁰

II. *The Overseer's New Plantation*

The inner city, the ghetto, the projects, are all fodder for sentimental white romanticism. But the artistic renderings by the likes of Wright of where black migrants so often end up when confronting the new urban North prove that such romantic glorification by whites is, if not purposefully diversionary, at least woefully misguided. Black migrants have not chosen the asceticism of a "humble" or "simple" life; the forces of white panopticism have forced black migrants into these overcrowded and impoverished areas to maximize the effectiveness of their surveillance of those migrants, thus assuring the dominant and exclusive position of the white

³⁰In another city, Harlem, in 1919, New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia called for a commission on the Harlem riot of that year, and the findings of the commission read like a sure-fire recipe for civic unrest within a population specifically targeted for discrimination and exploitation—namely, Harlem's black citizens. According to the report, landlords abused and exploited their black tenants' desperation and lack of other options (72-73); these same landlords would increasingly bump up rent prices for their black tenants in spite of dilapidated conditions (67), often resulting in tenants spending half of their income on rent (69); because of these high rents, entire families would cram themselves into single rooms (71); this overcrowding, compounded with something as petty as garbage discrimination (74), would inevitably lead to an increase in disease (92-93); adding insult to injury, there were only three proprietary, three volunteer, and only one municipal hospital in central Harlem at that time (93), resulting in the hospitals becoming overcrowded as well; and within these hospitals there was bad equipment and an overall discipline problem with disgruntled employees (98).

power structure Using Harlem as an example, James Baldwin would make this point bluntly in Nobody Knows My Name:

The projects in Harlem are hated. They are hated almost as much as policemen, and this is saying a great deal. And they are hated for the same reason: both reveal, unbearably, the real attitude of the white world, no matter how many liberal speeches are made, no matter how many lofty editorials are written, no matter how many civil-rights commissions are set up (63) [...] A ghetto can be improved in one way only: out of existence. (65)

The point is that the ghetto is neither noble nor quaint, but a zone of continuing and sustained discrimination. But the predicament of black migrants is not only no better in the North than it was in the South; according to Wright, it is, in fact, worse. Consider Sarah's resentful statement about the Party's exploitation of her husband Bob in Wright's The Outsider³¹: "Even in the South when the white folks lynched you, they told you *why!* You didn't agree with 'em, but, by God, they told you *why!*" (257) And, again, Jake Jackson expresses a similar sentiment in Lawd Today!: "Them was the days when we lived in hope (178) [...] The only difference between the North and the South is, them guys down there'll kill you, and these up here'll let you starve to death" (180).

The *modus operandi* for the new, northern slavery that is ghettoization is *concentration*—that is, severely limiting the space within which the constantly-incoming black migrants can settle. In Wright's 1927 Chicago, for instance, and according to Hazel Rowley, the city's African-American population had grown to more than 100,000 from the roughly 40,000 of 1916 at the beginning of the Great Migration—but this was all within a space, the Black Belt, far limited and diminished by housing discrimination and environmental racism; as Rowley sums

³¹First published in 1953, thirteen years after Native Son.

up, “Chicago had become the second largest black city in the United States, after New York [but] Chicago was also the most residentially segregated city in the nation” (52-53). This was because, during that same year, the Chicago Real Estate Board had come up with a “Model Racial Restrictive Covenant” to “protect whites from black residents,” with actual legal documents written up between white home owners who pledged “not to rent, lease, or sell their property to ‘colored persons’,” with the courts enforcing them, and transgressors under threat of lawsuits (53). The typical Black Belt experience for newly arrived black migrants was evidence of an institutionalized system of concentrating a specific populace; as Rowley outlines, a black family moves into a previously white street, are greeted with violence, and panic is whipped up by real estate “panic-peddlers” trying to encourage white owners to sell for very cheap; realtors buy the cheap property and subdivide the apartments into one- or two-bedroom “kitchenettes”; white tenants might have paid \$50/month for a seven-room apartment, while black tenants were charged \$25/week for a one- or two-room apartment; landlords ignore upkeep of the apartment buildings to the point of it eventually being condemned (though city officials rarely demolish them—out of actual pity for the black tenants!); and because of high rent, whole families would inhabit one room, resulting in predictable social problems: disease (including sexually-transmitted diseases, seven times higher than anywhere else in the city), crime, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, casual law enforcement, and black-on-black crime (53-54).

There is, of course, an uncanniness, an unsettling familiarity, that black migrants feel upon reaching the urban North. And disillusionment gives way to horror when migrants realize that, not only is the situation in the North not as good as they had hoped, but might actually be the same as, even worse than, what they had fled from in the South.³² Similarly, the new slavery

³²Along with his presentation of Dr. Eckleburg as the panoptic “mad-scientist god of the wasteland,” Alan Lloyd-Smith presents a theme related to the migrant’s terror upon confronting the city, something he describes as Gatsby’s

and New Overseer with which black migrants find themselves confronted lead them to believe that what they find in the North is actually no better than what they had left in the South—as Robert B. Stepto says, black migrants “experience mobility, only to be confronted in turn by circumference” (71). And, according to Margaret Walker, Wright not only recognized this but made it a consistent theme of his work, testimony to his own discovery as a black migrant “that the landlords and bosses of the urban buildings in the North were no different from the lords of the land in the rural South” (Daemonic Genius 56). The haunting past, the source of the uncanny return, is, of course, the South. Most obviously, we see this in the geographic nomenclature of segregation in Wright’s city of migration, Chicago; African-American migrants are confined to the *South Side*. More subtly, we see it in the less obvious racism of rich whites’ condescending, self-serving philanthropy. Bigger is from Mississippi, and his father was, as he tells Jan, “killed in a riot when I was a kid—in the South” (74). Images of race riots and lynchings³³ occur throughout the hunt for Bigger, his capture, and especially his trial, with the white mob screaming things like “You black ape!” (337), “Burn ’im!” and “Kill ’im!” (338), sober testimony to the North’s not being so different from the South after all, to the profound disappointment of the collective black migrant spirit.³⁴

Whatever kindness that is shown by rich whites is sullied by the guilt and hypocrisy that it is based upon. Mr. Dalton apparently thinks that a few ping-pong table donations to the local boys’ clubs and hiring black people for driving and housework makes up for his ownership of the

mistake: “to believe that the past can be superseded, transfigured, overcome by the valiant present—a very American assumption” (1). To further define this erroneous assumption, Lloyd-Smith defines its opposition as the American Gothic, which is about “the *return* of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself” (1).

³³In The Chicago Race Riots: July, 1919 (first published in 1919), Carl Sandburg describes Chicago at this time as a receiving station for those fleeing lynching in the South (26, 29).

³⁴In Anatomy of Four Race Riots, Lee E. Williams and Lee E. Williams II write about how, much like how Douglass had been surprised and frightened at seeing Southerners up North, many white Southerners had come North during the Great Migration creating bitter labor competition and spreading racism (92).

South Side Real Estate Company. Also, as shown in his testimony to Boris Max, he seems to have convinced himself that the indirect, out-of-sight-out-of-mind nature of his involvement with real estate makes it less harmful, that his invisibility as a landlord to his tenants somehow absolves him from responsibility for their predicaments:

“Now, Mr. Dalton, the Thomas family paid you...”

“Not to *me!* They pay rent to the South Side Real Estate Company.”

“You own the controlling stock in the Dalton Real Estate Company, don’t you?”

“Why, yes.”

“And that company in turn owns the stock that controls the South Side Real Estate Company, doesn’t it?”

“Why, yes.”

“I think I can say that the Thomas family pays rent to *you?*”

“Indirectly, yes.” (326)

In the end, Mr. Dalton’s evasiveness reveals his ultimate sense of underlying guilt, but he seems primarily concerned with making money. When asked who fixes the rent scales, his answer is “the law of supply and demand” (326), and he dismisses the racially selective designation of Chicago housing shortages as “an old custom,” saying of the black tenants, in one of his most embarrassingly transparent statements, “Well...Er...I—I—I don’t think they’d like to live any other place” (327). When Boris finally calls him out on his motives, saying that “you give back to them to ease the pain of their gouged lives and to salve the ache of your own conscience,” Mr. Dalton’s final smug reply is “I don’t know what you mean” (328). Similarly, even the “good guys,” Mary and Jan, do not appear to have the pure sympathies for Bigger and the rest of the black community—Jan seems most interested in advancing his Communist agenda, wanting to

use Bigger as a possible recruiting tool, and Mary's interest does not seem to go much beyond a superficial anthropological curiosity. Her references to songs "your people sing" (65) and wanting to see "how your people live" (69) are painfully patronizing, and her fascination with black life on the South Side, especially inside Ernie's Kitchen Shack, contains the insulting, condescending detachment of someone on a safari. Bigger later recalls with resentment, thinking of "those whose hate for him was so unfathomably deep that, after they had shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die, they could turn to him, as Mary had that night in the car, and say: 'I'd like to know how your people live'" (240).

References to "the line," the understood border between the Black Belt and the white neighborhoods, are made throughout Native Son. Bigger remembers that bombs were thrown by whites into houses like the long-abandoned ones he hides in with his girlfriend Bessie after Mary Dalton's remains are discovered (182).³⁵ Especially revealing is the description of the "tall buildings holding black life" (70) Bigger sees while driving Mary and Jan through the Black Belt at their request; the strong sense of imprisonment it evokes is only enhanced by Mary's naïve wistfulness: "Yet they *must* live like we live. They're *human*....There are twelve million of them....They live in our country....In the same city with us" (70). And this "holding" of "black life" is, in fact, a *packing in* of it, a fact perhaps most alarmingly portrayed by the lack of privacy suffered by the individuals of Bigger's family sharing a single one-room, rat-infested apartment, with the men having to avert their eyes for the women to change clothes and vice versa (3-4).

It quickly becomes clear that, to the forces of white hegemony, the black subject is expendable, a fair-game sacrifice for the dominant cultural and economic agenda.³⁶ When considering the degree to which these black urban newcomers are exploited within the systems

³⁵In Lawd Today!, Jake also remembers how black homes were bombed during the Chicago race riots (172).

³⁶Indeed, according to Joseph Bodzioc, the white mythos is a power so terrifying that it is willing to sacrifice one of its own, as was the case with Mary Dalton, to get to sacrificing a black migrant such as Bigger Thomas (40).

of housing discrimination and real estate fraud, the relationship between real estate officials and their black tenants is a parasitic one, exactly how Thorstein Veblen describes the relationship of the “leisure” classes, especially within the business world, to the working classes in The Theory of the Leisure Class,³⁷ their relation being one of “acquisition, not of production; of exploitation, not of serviceability” (153). Veblen’s understanding describes a Hegelian relationship, with the upper class’s pseudo-aristocracy defined by their leisure and ownership (18), in which the work of a bondsman—namely, the toil and rent money of the black tenant—defines the dominance of the lord—in this case, *landlord*. And this relationship does not end with those whites actually in power, but trickles downward to other whites along class and political lines in their relation to black migrants. Poor whites, for instance, as Bigger figures, are more hateful of blacks “because they didn’t have their share of the money” and “too stupid” to play the white “game” (33-34). Also, in Lawd Today!, Jake reveals how white labor competition is a key source of bitterness, resentment, and economic stress for Depression-era urban black people—be it white student-clerks working temporarily at the post office where he works regularly (117) or out-of-work white people who need the less appealing jobs now (132)—“nigger work,” as Capeci describes it (35). Indeed, as Lee E. Williams points out, many of these now unemployed white people were returning white veterans who proved to be not only a source of labor competition, but housing competition as well (78).

III. *The New Dungeon*

The new kind of slavery encountered by black migrants in the North leads to a sense of inescapability—for the black migrants, the overcrowded imprisonment of urban segregation; for

³⁷“Their office is of a parasitic character [...] The conventions of the business world have grown up under the selective surveillance of this principle of predation or parasitism” (153).

the more fortunate whites, the deep-seeded racism of those who do not even realize that they are being racist—and Wright’s descriptions of urban decay allows for a truly American gothic sensibility, a sense of the past revisited. The houses left behind by the retreating whites—passed down to blacks, then abandoned altogether, like the ones Bigger and Bessie hide out in—have “black windows, like blind eyes, buildings like skeletons standing with snow on their bones in the winter winds” (173), windows “like the eye-sockets of empty skulls” (231). Such language makes the South Side out to be one large above-ground dungeon. Indeed, Alan Lloyd-Smith cites as a key American substitution for the European gothic “the city for the subterranean rooms and corridors of the monastery” (4). But with Native Son, the city *is* the dungeon, turning Bigger’s world into “a strange labyrinth” (240) of buildings, flats, and corners, with even the roof-tops on top of which he is tracked like an animal and finally captured described as “a maze” (246), the underground realm of the European gothic brought to the surface. However, Bigger is not the gothic villain chasing some helpless heroine through the catacombs; rather, *he* is the one being pursued—the representative black migrant imprisoned, observed, and controlled by the city’s white panoptic forces. It should be remembered that, in spite of his brutality, the point is that Bigger is none the less a victim of white panopticism, a “monster” created by the forces of white oppression acting upon him for virtually his entire life.

James Baldwin writes, describing Harlem: “The projects are hideous, of course, there being a law, apparently respected throughout the world, that popular housing shall be as cheerless as a prison” (Nobody 63). Housing for blacks in Harlem were, after all, built for another race and economic level, according to Nat Brandt; Harlem had begun in the seventeenth century, annexed and drained by New York, but the 1904 depression left behind new but empty apartment houses which were picked up and resold to incoming black migrants by Philip A.

Payton (Harlem at War 25-28). This opportunism was a direct result of the combination of white flight and the Great Migration, and further complications resulted from the already-mentioned poor whites as well as immigrant competition for jobs (28). Given this competition for already very limited space and continued racial pressures within that very limited space, black migrants typically found that they had run from the prison of the plantation only to reach the “prison” of overpriced substandard housing in the urban North—from one dungeon to another.

The Dalton house itself is portrayed in gothic terms—like a European gothic manor, part of “a cold and distant world [full of] white secrets carefully guarded,” complete with the intimidating “high, black, iron picket fence” (44)³⁸ keeping outsiders at bay and starkly separating it from the dungeon-like habitations of the black communities it exploits for wealth, power, and status. Evie Shockley points out how this gothicizing of the black home space actually turns the home ideal on its head, taking away the assumptions of protection and privacy traditionally associated with the home, thus rendering the typical African-American literary portrayal of the black migrant’s urban experience as gothic rather than naturalistic, with the space of the street and the substandard housing that lines it acting as the new version of the medieval dungeon (446-447). In Wright’s work, this gothicizing of the black home stylistically and metaphorically indicates the race-based marginalization of black migrants by the white panoptic forces working to isolate and concentrate them. And this Gothicism provides an especially useful alternative to naturalism for portraying how those marginalizing forces are far more human, intentional, and malicious.

Within the northern city’s new dungeon, the pressures and influences of the dominant white culture bombard the black subject, who often internalizes these standards and influences for the sake of sheer survival and comfort. All of this leads to the distortion of black migrants’

³⁸Joseph Bodziock points this out in “Richard Wright and Afro-American Gothic” (31).

sense of humanity and identity through distorting their perception—everything in the seemingly underground space of the black ghetto made “strange and unreal” to the likes of Fred Daniels in Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1415), given his internalization of the standards of the above-ground white world. The case is even stronger with Bigger Thomas, who, when he sees the sky-writing airplane overhead, mumbles to himself bitterly, “I could fly one of them things if I had a chance” (16). This, for Keneth Kinnamon, illustrates the painful contrast between the opportunities afforded to whites by white society who, with working-class African-Americans like Bigger, instead “consigns him to the hell of the Dalton basement to maintain the glowing, searing, fiery furnace” (65). Indeed, with Bigger, the distortion appears to be not only of his perception but of his very character, as if the fires of the basement furnace actually transform him diabolically, shaping him toward a criminal, murderous direction.

In his introduction to Native Son, Arnold Rampersad describes the reasons Wright, a migrant himself, had for moving to Chicago in 1927 from Mississippi, where he was born: “His jobs in the South were marked by harassment by whites and by his own disdain for what segregation and racism had done to distort the humanity of his fellow blacks, as he saw it” (xii). An alarming example of such distortion is something that Bigger sees from a roof-top before his capture:

Directly below him, one floor away, through a window without shades, he saw a room in which were two small iron beds with sheets dirty and crumpled. In one bed sat three naked black children looking across the room to the other bed on which lay a man and woman, both naked and black in the sunlight. There were quick, jerky movements on the bed where the man and woman lay, and the three

children were watching. It was familiar; he had seen things like that when he was a little boy sleeping five in a room. (247)

Such close quarters clearly make for a quick breakdown of appropriate familial sexual boundaries, even creating incestuous tensions, hinted at by the suspicious way Bigger keeps looking at his own sister, Vera. But the point is how dehumanizing conditions make for such severely compromised humanity, and how the criminal and neglectful behavior so stereotypically associated with working-class African-Americans is very likely a result of the inhumane squalor to which they are subjected through housing discrimination and segregation. The forces of white panopticism distort them—morally, psychologically, and even physically. As Capeci points out about Harlem during the 1940s, working-class blacks were so discriminated against in seeking employment that many of them became too frustrated to even apply for work, often resulting in illegal and unhealthy practices to pay rent (37-39) and an increase in the number of neglected and homeless children (41). Given the insistence of the pressures upon black migrants and the seeming hopelessness of their situation, one can see how a character like Jake in Lawd Today! could find his only solace in getting “lowdown” (195)—that is, with alcohol and women other than his wife. Thanks to the oppressive forces acting so relentlessly upon them, the very reality of black migrants appears to become monstrously distorted.

However, the ultimate goal of such distorting dehumanization on the part of the white hegemony is to isolate black migrants, to set them apart for surveillance and observation—to quarantine them within a slum. But Wright’s African-American urban migrants clearly do not have the same chances that, say, the white Carrie Meeber does, and his choices of metaphor are fittingly more intense, angry, and insistent—like Fred Daniels’ finding himself lost underground in a sewer after running from the police, feeling “a million miles away from the world” (“The

Man Who Lived Underground” 1416) as he encounters such powerful sights as a dead baby—“dead, cold, nothing” (1418); that is, forsaken—half-submerged in the sewer water before himself getting shot to death by the police and washing away in the sewer like an “object [...] lost in the heart of the earth” (1450). This is made all the more tragic when considering how Fred had apparently so internalized the laws and standards of the white world above as to ultimately turn *himself* in—demonstrating how, according to Michel Fabre, Daniels is no less a prisoner of the preexisting relationships because reversal implies acceptance, how it is essentially impossible for him to elude “culture and heritage” and therefore wanting to return from the underground (99). The ghetto acts, as Heise says, as the toilet for the dominant white culture’s urban America and the black migrants themselves treated as white society’s waste (129), with the sewer “materializing the ideology of racial abjection” (148); under the “duress of institutional racism and violently enforced spatial isolation” (146), ghettoized black migrants become distorted in both their perception and their character by “amnesia, mental fragmentation [both achieved through the internalization of the dominant cultural ideology], and the release of repressed desires [through crime or a kind of desperate and hopeless hedonism]” (144). The gothic treatment thus seems to provide a far more appropriate approach to conveying the psychological torture and degradation that go into twisting and transforming individual black migrants such as Fred and Bigger toward assimilation, self-loathing, and acting out through violence. It perhaps more closely and essentially communicates, with its shocking and grotesque aesthetics, the real-life horror of urban segregation and environmental racism.

IV. *Internalizing Forces*

Internalization on the part of the black migrant of the white hegemony's dominant ideology is no accidental byproduct of white panopticism. It is, in fact, an intentionally inspired effect, one that complements white panopticism's more direct machinations to quarantine and make visible those representing the Other with a more indirect, indoctrinating mechanism that inspires those representing the Other to make *themselves* more visible for categorization and separation. Through the painfully distorting pressures to which black migrants are subjected, the hegemony presents its standards and norms as the sole means to a more comfortable and dignified (not to mention less dehumanized) life.³⁹ And this can raise some rather unsettling questions pertaining to black migrants' true sense of national identity and feelings toward their troubled and extremely fractured historical past.

Michel Fabre explains how the underground motif in Wright's literature "clearly represents the marginal character of the black man's existence and his ambiguous rapport with American civilization" (97) and points out the "obscene disparity" between a black migrant's actual situation and his aspirations—aspirations inspired by the standards of the new northern city's dominant white culture (100). A big part of this ambiguity comes from the internalization by the black migrant of the cityscape's dominant ideology. And this internalization is a defining feature of that ideology's influence and power—how its new system of slavery works from within as well as without; according to Farah Jasmine Griffin:

This power also seeks to educate migrants and to create in them a desire for those things available in the dominant society [...] At times, the migrants themselves engage in acts of self-discipline. Often in their very attempts to resist they have

³⁹However, such acceptance of white hegemonic standards, according to Andrews, is what makes the Hamiltons in The Sport of the Gods so unprepared and vulnerable for what they come to face in the Tenderloin district; they "display the complacency of people who are satisfied with the world as it is"—"simple, well-meaning people" who are at worst "self-satisfied" and at best "naïve" (intro to The Sport of the Gods xv-xvi).

so internalized the effects of the power that represses them that they become complicit in their own subjugation. (102)

Fred Daniels' experiences underground provide the perfect example—not only with his final, desperate and irrational drive to resurface and go to the police station, but with such equally irrational gestures as papering the walls of his underground room with money, not so much for the money itself, but for the odd comfort provided by what it stands for (1432). Heise sees this as a futile attempt at a momentary escape (143), driven by Daniels' misguided, indoctrinated sense of guilt (147); the sewer in which Daniels has found himself is indicative of the black migrant's internalized sense of uncleanliness when compared as an Other to aboveground, white American criteria (130).

As has already been mentioned, snow persists symbolically throughout the novel as an overwhelming, blanketing, inescapable whiteness. This is indicative, according to Bodziok of how Wright manipulates the influence of Edgar Allan Poe, whose murderous characters are driven primarily from within, by madness; Wright, instead, portrays his protagonists as driven from without by the white mythos (39). But Wright hints at a more literal internalization with Bigger, with all of the transformative actions taking place in the snow *at night*, the “white snow and the night” (147) surrounding Bigger and Bessie as they flee toward the abandoned buildings indicating that the gothic historicity of America is *shared* between black and white, archetypically concentrated within Bigger, who, as the newspapers reporting on his capture suggest, “may have a minor portion of white blood in his veins, a mixture which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature” (281). Given this hereditary possibility, and in spite of his ostensible hatred for whites, Bigger seems, in fact, to achingly long to *be* white:

It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked

along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black. (Native Son 240)

Bigger experiences the instability of racial doubling to a painful extent, and we see both patriarchal tyranny and transgressive sexuality in his more sadistic actions; notice the incestuous undertone in the relish with which he torments Vera with the dead rat to the point of her fainting, “enjoying his sister’s fear” (7), and the prison-homoeroticism in how he forces Gus to lick his phallic knife-blade (39). Both incidents hint at rape, which later takes on a heavier significance, both literally and symbolically, in terms of Bigger’s transformation. What is so uncanny in Wright’s novel, then, is how much like his white persecutors Bigger becomes, especially when it comes to his employers; his relationship with them begins to resemble more of a tacit partnership than a socially tiered subservience. In his accidental “getting back at” the whites through the initial success of his crime, he is beginning to more closely identify with something within them. This becomes chillingly more apparent as Bigger progresses toward his rape and murder of Bessie—from his accidental crimes against whites toward his deliberate crimes against blacks. Indeed, right after accidentally killing Mary and fooling her parents, “Bessie was the one he wanted to see now” (129). Finally, through Bessie’s actual rape and murder, Bigger seems to *become* the white persecutor, rather than merely resembling him, through an act more historically associated with the slave-owner and the overseer than the slave. And his conclusion that “what [he] killed for [...] must’ve been pretty deep in [him] [and] must’ve been good!” (429) demonstrates just how deeply he has internalized the forces of white society around him.

An ironic twist to Bigger's internalization of white standards is his thoughts concerning rich blacks, the "leaders" of his race, as Boris Max describes them. Bigger's response to Boris is this: "They rich, even though the white folks treat them almost like they do me. They almost like the white people, when it comes to guys like me. They say guys like me make it hard for them to get along with white folks" (357). Even Cross Damon, who possesses the intellectual capacity for self-consciousness and self-scrutiny that is lacking in Bigger and other Wright protagonists, however, seems incapable of escaping the white hegemony's strategy of internalization through indoctrination; his intelligence, in fact, only makes him more aware of it. After killing Gil and Herndon, for example, Cross cannot help but feel like a hypocrite—that, in killing "two little gods," he too "had acted like a little god" (308), had "taken on the guise of the monster he had slain" (309). The pressures toward assimilation and internalization, in fact, prove to have the force capable of making the Other—the working-class African-American migrant, in this case—not only turn to the dominant ideology out of lack of better alternatives, but also of producing levels of exhaustion and frustration so complete as to make those same urban black people seek *comfort* in this new slavery! Take, for instance, the heartbreaking surrender with which Sarah, after her husband Bob has been sold out and deported for imprisonment back to Trinidad, wants to go back to church and to confession; as Cross sees it, "She had to rest, to find support, a master; she was yearning to submit" (550).⁴⁰

According to Foucault, "the guilty person is only one of the targets of punishment. For punishment is directed above all at others, at all the potentially guilty" (108). It must be remembered that the panopticism of the white hegemony works toward *isolation*, and that an

⁴⁰Even Cross is reduced to a similar level of surrender after the interrogating Houston decides to let him go free: "Suddenly he wanted to beg this man not to leave him [...] He was alone. He felt like screaming for Houston to come back, to talk to him, to tell him what to do" (573). And even as he is dying from the gunshot wound apparently caused by the pursuing Menti and Hank, Cross "longed to see Houston," and, with Houston leaning over him, he thinks, "Houston! [My] pal! The old hunchback!" (583).

isolated subject (or group of subjects) is easier to observe and to place under surveillance; furthermore, if white panopticism can instill a self-preserving reflex of self-policing within the black migrant community, all the better for the dominant urban culture. Consider how other black migrants refuse to help Bigger during his capture—how two in particular that he overhears while sneaking into an uninhabited flat argue over whether or not they would give him up to the police should they encounter him, concluding that “*ever*’ nigger looks guilty t’ white folks when somebody’s done a crime,” and that this is because “so many of us ack like Bigger Thomas [...] When yuhack like Bigger Thomas yuh stir up trouble.” (251) But Wright’s black characters clearly have a greater stake in their wish—their *need*, really—to not get themselves connected with the likes of Bigger; their immediate financial as well as physical well-being, even their lives, may depend on it. This, of course, adds further incentive toward accepting and internalizing the dominant culture’s norms. But also, an even more sinister dimension to the subtlety of white panopticism’s mechanisms is revealed, for once the black migrant reaches a certain degree of internalization—that is, acceptance and even comfort with the “white way”—he is vulnerable to the possibility of being more directly *used*, becoming another one of the New Overseer’s tools, another agent of white panopticism.

V. *Recruiting Delinquency*

Through the mechanisms of internalization, it becomes clear that the New Overseer’s use of the black migrant is not always such a direct sacrifice; it can use its pressurizing methods of indoctrination for purposes of *recruitment* as well, a process in which the dominant culture’s “secret agents” are procured through the visibility of a specific kind of criminality that Foucault refers to as “delinquency”:

Delinquency, with the secret agents that it procures, but also with the generalized policing that it authorizes, constitutes a means of perpetual surveillance of the population: an apparatus that makes it possible to supervise, through the delinquents themselves, the whole social field. Delinquency functions as a political observatory. (281)

This system of recruitment provides yet another avenue toward targeting and sacrificing the urban black populace. Its possibilities for sacrifice range from the all-out absorption and use of the likes of Hank in The Outsider, who is recruited by the Party to, along with Menti, follow and intimidate the protagonist Cross Damon; to the disposal of those like Bigger and Fred in order to make an example of those who do not fully accept the hegemony's norms, isolating them from their black community in the process.

The precursor to this recruitment is a proliferation of the dominant culture's panoptic strategies, a proliferation and dissemination of the New Overseer into a potential legion of lesser overseers (including twentieth-century versions of the "driver," or the black version of an overseer), which can create a labyrinthine world of uncertainty for everyone beneath the chief, often less accessible overseer (As opposed to white recruits, however, black recruits serve the additional function of example and distraction—as a visible example of the internalization and assimilation that the white hegemony expects of its black subjects, and as a diversionary object of blame to distract the black population from the true and ultimate source of its ill treatment). In The Outsider, for example, the Party, who claims to be working against the white, capitalist status quo, appears to operate under a complexly multiplied incentive system; as Cross reflects upon the new knowledge that Menti has been spying on his supposed superior Hilton:

What a system of life! Spies spying upon spies who were being spied upon! [...] an elaborate kind of transparent ant heap in which the most intimate feelings of all the men and women in it would be known, a glass jailhouse in which the subjective existence of each man and woman would be public each living moment [...] And for his spying in this ant heap, each spy would derive, as his reward, a satisfaction from the godlike position which he could assume in relation to his neighbor. (453)

Thus, a key strategy by which the New Overseer ensures the continued cooperation and loyalty of his agents is to trick them into believing that they are somehow on par with him in terms of overseeing power by giving them people and populations to oversee! This is true, upon further examination, not only of the likes of Hank and Menti, but of even the District Attorney Houston, whose confessed sympathies toward criminals reveal how even someone so seemingly all-powerful as he can demonstrate a degree of unwillingness and remorse toward his own duties. Even the more obviously malicious Buckley, from Native Son, is only an agent of the law made necessary by the more detached and powerful Mr. Dalton.

James Baldwin's thoughts on cops in Harlem provide an appropriate set-up for white panopticism's recruiting mechanisms and the philosophy behind those mechanisms: "Their very presence is an insult [...] They represent the force of the white world, and that world's real intentions are, simply, for that world's criminal profit and ease, to keep the black man corralled up here, in his place" (Nobody 65). Foucault's thoughts on delinquency and its recruitment certainly apply to the New Overseer's making an example out of certain black criminals to lend an intimidating tangibility to his authority; the black criminal—or the more racially general "convict" mentioned by Foucault—acts as a sign of visible authority to the hegemony's black

subjects, thus perpetuating the white culture's panoptic power. Indeed, the way in which Bigger is essentially forsaken by the black community is testimony to white panopticism's goal "to get all citizens to participate in the punishment of the social enemy and to render the exercise of the power to punish entirely adequate and transparent to the laws that publicly define it" (129). The black community's seeming agreement with white society's standards of difference and (black) criminality is, after all, in fact a coercion perpetrated by white society's dominance, built upon fear and alienation. Bigger thus provides for the reactivation of the code for the dominant white culture's dominance and seemingly inevitable triumph, acting as a source of instruction for the intimidated black masses—especially those with violent rebellion on their minds—to preserve order.

Another trajectory of white panoptic force is the various Communist organizations portrayed in Wright's works, who, even though their agenda is supposed to be counter to the white, capitalist status quo, ultimately exploit the black members they recruit as well. Indeed, perhaps even more chilling than Buckley in Native Son, are the various agents of the Party in The Outsider. Take, for instance, the thorough inquiries of Blimin; as Sarah reveals to Cross Damon:

That Blimin wanted to know what kind of books you read, what kind of mail you received, if you spoke any foreign languages, if you had any secret appointments, if a lot of telephone calls came for you, how large were the bills you spent, what kind of people came to see you, if I could hear you typing late at night, if you mailed any big envelopes...Lord, he was like a lawyer. (468)

But perhaps even more clever than the Party is the sympathetic but nonetheless dangerous District Attorney Houston, whose bringing in of Finch, the secretary of the Postal Union who

had negotiated Cross' \$800 loan (508), to the interrogation of Cross, and flying in of Cross' wife Gladys and his children (519), makes him perhaps the most powerful and far-reaching white panoptic force in The Outsider. Within white panopticism, though there are many layers of class and politics that subdivide the dominating white force, all of them seem to inevitably, even helplessly and unconsciously, come together at the heavy expense of the black migrant, who takes the full brunt of it all.

However, the black criminal who the machine of white panopticism molds out of a black migrant is not always so obviously sacrificed; and therein lies the opportunity for recruitment—how the possibility of incarceration or other punishment can create new agents through which the panoptic force can act. As Menti explains to Cross, “You have to *belong* to the Party” (372). This tacit agreement between the Party and Party member apparently goes so far as even “unto death and beyond,” as Menti further explains: “If, after I’m dead, the Party wanted to make use of me, wanted to place some interpretation upon my life or death, upon any of my actions for organizational or propaganda purposes, it has the right” (372). Cross’ response to Hilton before shooting him seems to say it all: “I might forgive you if you had been going to kill me. But, no; you were going to make me a slave” (402). That is, after all, the uncanny situation in which the black migrant finds himself. Given his considerable intellectual advantage over characters like Bigger, Cross demonstrates a much more conscious awareness of the new northern slavery and its machinations, especially in legal terms; prophetically certain that Houston will eventually track him down, he ponders how the real aim of was “to *inhibit* in the consciousness of man” certain kinds of consciousness “which the law had to *evoke* clearly and sharply in man’s consciousness,” for the law possesses “the strange capacity of creating vividly in man’s consciousness a sense of the reality of the crime it seeks to suppress” (411). Implied within the

law, then, is a kind of dare, a challenge that seems to say, “if you are *strong* enough, you can do so” (412)—that is, rebel and break the law. But such a rebellion is often visceral and without deliberation, the kind of rebellion toward which white panoptic power actually baits would-be rebels, for the conspicuousness of this rebellion fits perfectly into white panopticism’s design of surveillance and selection—selection for the purposes of not only individual example-making, but for perpetuating the assumptions of white supremacy and rightness through an apparent fulfillment of the black criminal stereotype.⁴¹

Cross also understands that, through the white hegemony’s recruitment of delinquency, the Party acts as a sort of unofficial but still useful arm of white panoptic power as well: “Though the Party was not an official adjunct to the police department, it did have wide powers of an effective and peculiar nature; it had its own underground apparatus and special methods of investigation” (462). Not that this awareness will do him any good,⁴² given the fact that he too, like Bigger Thomas and Fred Daniels, dies at the hands of the new slavery. But even up to the moment of his death, Cross knows that he “was now under twenty-four-hour surveillance” (466), thanks to Menti and the black Hank’s following him around and staking him out. The example of Cross thus sheds further light on the degrees of subtlety with which the forces of white panopticism can examine (even scrutinize) and select those members of the black migrant population they deem especially threatening for their intelligence (in addition to their indignance). The New Overseer’s rationale seems to be that, if a particular black subject proves

⁴¹Dowling points out how there is evidence of at least an unconscious understanding of this environmental encouragement of criminality in the cynical and corrupt business practices of Tenderloin district landlords in the late nineteenth century: “Once the center of white middle-class respectability, by the late 1870s the Tenderloin proper was a major theater district, and the subsequent army of pleasure seekers chased its ‘respectable’ residents uptown. Tenderloin landlords then faced a difficult choice: either turn the brownstones into multiple-family tenements for the crush of immigrant arrivals from Southern and Eastern Europe, or lease them to gambling proprietors and brothel owners who could afford significantly higher rents. They chose the second option, and seemingly overnight the Tenderloin became the most famous center of vice in New York history” (117).

⁴²This is certainly different with the case of Ellison’s intelligent protagonist in Invisible Man, which will be extensively examined in Chapter 4.

too smart for the simpler, first wave of indoctrination, then that subject can still be rendered useful through recruitment—both through isolating him class-wise and education-wise within his own community, and by flattering him with a false sense of equality within a system that is actually and no less white supremacist.

VI. *Terrible Bigger*

Farah Jasmine Griffin says that the African-American migration narrative is marked by four pivotal moments:

- (1) an event that propels the action northward, (2) a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban landscape, (3) an illustration of the migrant's attempt to negotiate the landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and (4) a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South. (3)

With Native Son, the latter two are obviously more apparent, with the first two having a less immediate, more residual significance, since the novel begins linearly from the Thomas family's waking up in the run-down apartment that they are clearly used to. However, Bigger's confrontation with the urban landscape and resulting vision of its possibilities produce a very dark hue of self-consciousness; he knows that "the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else" (10). And Bigger does kill, of course—though the true source of fear for the white status quo is his *accidental* killing of Mary rather than his intentional killing of Bessie; and the confidence he gains from his initial success at remaining undiscovered as Mary's murderer reveals a subtle understanding of the advantages of being underestimated—of being "at the bottom of the world"

(150), language which again recalls the gothic underground-vs.-aboveground motif of mid-twentieth-century African-American migration narratives. Even toward the conclusion of Native Son, Bigger does not come across as completely contrite; he feels “free for the first time in his life” after accidentally killing Mary, having “accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for the murder” for its putting him “into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him” (274). The “faint, wry, bitter smile” (430) that is Bigger’s final gesture in the novel then reveals a kind of ironic, dark victory; he’s been a bigger part of the white world than he thought, what he’s wished for all along.

But though the accidental killing of Mary brings a sense of renewal for Bigger, it does so only in the most chilling sense. Even while he’s kissing Mary, the “thought and conviction that Jan had had her a lot flashed through his mind” (84), which only increases his passion. This harkens back to another image from the newsreel, of Mary, “whose waist was encircled by the arms of a man,” that “well-known radical” (32) Jan. Mary’s body is an arena of conquest, and Bigger’s crossing of that line is a kind of rebellious victory, a way of saying, “Now I’m having what you’ve had and didn’t want me to have!” This gives him a sort of internalized swagger, a sense that he has “created a new life for himself” (105) through the killing, to the extent that “not once did he feel the need to tell himself that it had been an accident” (106). He is quite proud of himself, being the supposedly weak and scared black man who dared to go where he was not supposed to—not only across the geographic line, but the social one as well.

Bigger’s apparent living up to all of the worst white stereotypes and prejudices against African-Americans, especially of the poorer classes, defines Wright’s legacy as an African-American writer—as a dealer of modern, African-American “terrible honesty”; that is, living up to, artistically, the worst and most unfair of whites’ dreadful expectations and then showing them

how this fulfillment of such stereotypes would, if true, be *all* their fault. Wright runs the risk of being the authorial equivalent of the threat apparently posed by Fred Daniels to the police officers who kill him and say, “You’ve got to shoot his kind; they’d wreck things” (“The Man Who Lived Underground” 1450). For if black migrants do resort to violent and criminal behavior, it is the result of long-accumulating and long pent-up frustration and grievances; Walter White had posited this his list of the eight causes for American race riots: 1.) racial prejudice, 2.) economic competition, 3.) political corruption and exploitation of black voters, 4.) police inefficiency, 5.) newspapers’ lying about black crimes, 6.) unpublished crimes against blacks, 7.) bad housing, and 8.) competition between white and black veterans (Anatomy 91-92). Similarly, Sandburg had documented a black veteran’s warning about how segregation only brings discord, through a “commercializing” of “racial antagonisms” (15). But there is perhaps a troublingly constructive element to such violence, as the violent revolutions central to the history of the United States of America unavoidably (and begrudgingly) have proven. Indeed, Heise describes urban riots as possible acts of “remaking” (129), a last-straw reaction to a city’s spatial inequalities (134).

However, beginning with *Bigger*, one runs into considerable problems. In spite of his importance as the first step in this tradition of African-American terrible honesty against white panopticism, he is by far the least sympathetic of these migration-narrative “heroes”; he is a criminal, a murderer, a bully, and a rapist. Also, as is the case with Petry’s *Lutie Johnson*, Wright’s protagonists, especially *Bigger*, do not win, even ambiguously. From this point, the following chapters will work to unpack the problems posed by Wright by examining their incremental resolutions in the works of Wright’s contemporary successors—Petry and Ellison—as well as some of his much later successors in the concluding chapter. The work of Petry, for

instance, though her protagonist too is a “loser,” provides a significant counterpoint to Wright’s treatment of gender; and with Ellison one sees what is perhaps the closest thing to a “winner” in his nameless narrator—what is perhaps the successful culmination of Wright-esque “terrible honesty.”

Chapter Three: “The Horrible Choice”

There are some obvious similarities between Ann Petry’s best-known work, The Street, and Wright’s Native Son. Housing discrimination provides the chief means through which the sinister, panoptic forces act upon the protagonist, Lutie Johnson—especially the claustrophobic packing-in of entire families into single one-bedroom apartments, the reference to a “line” (206) of geographic segregation, and the omnipresence of snow as a symbol of the dominant white culture. And, like Bigger Thomas, Lutie too is driven to kill. The difference is that she does so in self-defense, against the assault and attempted rape by Boots Smith, making her a relatively more sympathetic character. Also, Lutie, unlike Bigger, gets to live. However, like Bigger, she is *defeated* by the forces acting against her; in order for her to have another chance at life—and, as she sees it, to give her son Bub a better chance at life, she must abandon him, leaving him behind in New York so that she might escape to Chicago. In short, Lutie Johnson and Bigger Thomas both lose.⁴³

Where Lutie finds herself at the conclusion of The Street is certainly a step beyond the more straightforward fate of Bigger, but the price—one spelled out in terms of motherhood and family, her having to abandon her son—is a considerable sacrifice, especially when considering slavery’s history of undermining and often severing family ties, as has been consistently documented in nineteenth-century slave narratives. The consequences of the continued institutional racism of Jim Crow laws upon the stability and unity of African-American families

⁴³The protagonist of Ellison’s Invisible Man, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter, marks an ambiguous departure from this trend of defeat.

is also well documented throughout post-bellum, pre-Harlem African-American works such as Francis E.W. Harper's Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted (1892) and Charles W. Chestnutt's "The Wife of His Youth" (1899), and Harlem Renaissance-era works such as Walter White's Flight (1926).⁴⁴ Along these lines, as well as along the obvious lines of gender, Petry's work has perhaps more in common with that of Harriet Jacobs⁴⁵ than Frederick Douglass' narratives as an example of a new slave narrative for the mid-twentieth century. The stories of Douglass and his twentieth-century counterparts in Wright and Ellison are, after all, about the journeys and self-actualizations of childless men. The stories of Jacobs and Petry are about mothers; their protagonists, then, are much less immediately self-centered, with perhaps an even greater sense of urgency and pathos attached to their struggles. Furthermore, motherhood defines the gender difference in the ways that black *female* subjects are targeted by white panoptic power; children become another wedge of influence and manipulation, another means by which the black female subject is "kept in her place." This makes freedom and escape only possible through the heartbreak of family separation and rupture, which can lead further to desperate, self-defensive and callousing changes in attitudes towards children, especially one's own.⁴⁶ Nella Larsen's Quicksand (written almost twenty years before The Street) also comes to mind, with protagonist

⁴⁴The ostensibly white Iola's discovery of her own African ancestry and refusal to "pass" reunites her with and introduces her to more dark-skinned relatives such as her uncle Robert Johnson and her maternal grandmother Harriet. In "The Wife of His Youth," Mr. Ryder (real name, Sam Taylor) is reunited with his pre-Emancipation wife Liza Jane just as he is about to marry another woman. In Flight, Mimi must temporarily abandon her son Jean to an orphanage in order to seek better employment opportunities in another part of the country.

⁴⁵In Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), Jacobs recounts her desperate attempts to elude the sexual pursuit of her master, Dr. Flint. Such measures include her agreeing to an affair with a white neighbor, Mr. Sands, with whom she has two children. Rather than give her up, Dr. Flint engages in a torturous campaign of vengeance against Harriet (or Linda, as she calls herself in the narrative), sending her to be broken in at a plantation and even resorting to the particular psychological torture of targeting her two children, which ultimately inspires Harriet to seemingly escape, actually hiding in the attic of her mother's shack-house, where her children are staying. She eventually makes it to the North with her children, eluding Dr. Flint and his family's attempts to retrieve her even there.

⁴⁶Take for instance, in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, Ruth Younger's impulse toward abortion when she finds out that she is pregnant again, knowing that another mouth to feed and body to inhabit the already cramped space of the family's apartment has the potential to increase, not alleviate, her family's financial struggles and the growing emotional gulf between herself and her husband Walter. Hansberry and her play will be further discussed in the final chapter.

Helga Crane ending up trapped in a loveless marriage of convenience to a southern black preacher, and whose own children (birthed in rapid succession) leave her feeling trapped, defeated, and used up—in spite of the strong maternal instincts that ultimately keep her from abandoning them and their father (135). Quicksand, in fact, ends on a note equating children with life-crushing burden: “And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child” (135). Around the same time as Quicksand, and perhaps less seriously, there is the example of Mimi Daquin in Walter White’s Flight, who must resort to temporarily placing her son Jean in an orphanage in Baltimore (passing for white) while she financially gets back on her feet with better job opportunities in New York (181-183). Obviously, the loss of Mimi’s son is merely temporary, with no murder having been committed to clinch the separation. Works such as Flight and Quicksand thus demonstrate how not only sexuality, but motherhood and family as well, define the added dimensions of predatory targeting and suffering experienced by black women at the hands of the New Overseer. However, Petry avoids both the relative happy ending of Flight and the continuing entrapment at the conclusion of Quicksand with Lutie’s bitterly costly “escape” from Junto.

Motherhood also defines Petry’s point of departure from what is perhaps Dreiser’s best-known female protagonist, Carrie Meeber of Sister Carrie. For if Wright’s work represents a development away from Dreiser’s urban naturalism, Petry’s work demonstrates some key differences between the plight of the white female urban newcomer and that of the black female migrant. Both protagonists are affected by their exposure, however distant, to the finer things in life—Carrie by the finer clothes of the chorus girls (377) and the “wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women” (22) that the city seems to potentially hold for her, and Lutie by the

“miracle” (37) of a house and the expensive tastes of the Chandlers, a rich white family for whom she once worked. But the white Carrie Meeber obviously has more options than the black Lutie Johnson. The “cold reality” (9) represented by Carrie’s poor sister Minnie and her humble apartment is something from which Carrie can actually run and become rich. Lutie, of course, cannot do this and seems doomed to inhabit that “cold reality” for the rest of her life. Though Carrie is initially dependent upon the likes of Drouet and Hurstwood for social-financial opportunities, she can leave them once she achieves self-sufficiency; she can freely leave, even inverting the men’s attempts at sexual entrapment through gift-giving.⁴⁷ Lutie obviously never reaches the heights that Carrie does; and, more importantly, the loss which ultimately defines Lutie’s disillusionment—in the form of an actual, living child in her son Bub—is obviously much more tangible than Carrie’s vague sense of disenchantment for her superficial success.⁴⁸

Like Wright, the departure of Petry’s work from the influence of urban naturalism is gothic in nature—in fact, even more so than Wright, to an extent that approaches the clichéd and the cartoonish. However, such entertaining and sensational surface decoration acts as a temporary diversion from what The Street ultimately reveals as the true horror, one far less entertaining and much closer to home: that is, the ways in which the New Overseer specifically acts upon black female subjects, mothers in particular, to ensure their enduring place within a new kind of slavery; and the heartbreaking measures to which these subjects must resort, through painful sacrifice of their sense of family and motherhood, to attain their freedom. This chapter examines just how big of a difference gender makes in defining the role of the New Overseer and

⁴⁷Carrie does so, of course, to the point of her attaining an arguable “bad guy” position in the text as a Siren-like lure leading men like Hurstwood to their own destruction.

⁴⁸The same can be said for other white heroines, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Daisy Buchanan and Judy Jones (from The Great Gatsby and “Winter Dreams,” respectively), both of whom survive to live rather unglamorous married lives, with vast trails of male-suitor casualties in their wake (with Daisy, of course, the “casualty” is much more literal, with the death of the title character).

his relationship to his pre-twentieth-century predecessor as portrayed in the narrative of Harriet Jacobs. Petry's black female perspective sheds light on the more sexually focused species of predation and exploitation exercised by white panoptic forces. Such a focus requires a more sexually predatory and sexually selective system of recruitment and dependency, with women—from the lowly Min to the more powerful Mrs. Hedges—ultimately dependent upon the power of men, often with the added edge of domestic abuse.⁴⁹ A black woman is thus left to endure and negotiate a system in which she is dependently bound to a spouse or partner whose abuse of her stems from the same pressures acting upon her as a black migrant. However, according to Lawrence P. Jackson:

Petry molded the feminism available for her day, one that did not seek to blame black men for the poor standing of the group. Lutie angrily concludes that her family life has dissolved because of her husband's inability to find work. Instead of the comfortable patriarchy available to white women, black women produce the family's income. (231)

Petry thus understood the true complexity of the domestic strife and broken homes typical within working-class black homes—how, under white panopticism, black women who experience domestic instability, abuse and abandonment are, in fact, the victims of victims. Domestic partners alike share oppression under the strategic initiatives of the dominant society. And the initiatives of Junto make for a design that is shocking in its calculated meticulousness.

I. *Junto and the Junto: A Tactic of Surveillance*

⁴⁹In another work, the short story "Like a Winding Sheet," Petry makes clear the connection between the pressures felt by black men under white panopticism and the abuse suffered by black women at the hands of those same men within the domestic sphere. The ill-timed teasing by his wife—"You're nothing but an old hungry nigger trying to act tough" (210)—Joseph perpetrates on her the violence of which he could only fantasize for his white female boss (who actually called him a "nigger") and the white female diner clerk who had apparently refused him service.

In The Street, Lutie's gender helps Petry to reveal a new side of the New Overseer, one whose would-be victim is the sexually preyed-upon damsel in distress. This new side is exposed through Junto, owner of Junto's Bar and Grill and overall orchestrator of the local ghetto economy. Like Jacobs' Dr. Flint, Junto has sex particularly in mind, wanting to essentially make Lutie his whore—or mistress. Junto's more casual approach to panopticism perhaps makes him even more maddening than the overseer of old; he seems so much gentler than the likes of the more obviously malicious and directly violent Dr. Flint. This apparently softer approach, however, is afforded by a system of panopticism more sophisticated and elaborate than anything the old overseer had at his disposal; as William Scott writes, a network like Junto's "requires an elaborate mechanism of surveillance to keep it intact" (109). This certainly does not make him any different from Wright's Buckley and Mr. Dalton. However, what *is* different is how much more up-close and personal Junto prefers to be than Wright's characters; and he achieves this more hands-on approach not only with Junto's Bar and Grill, but by means of a three-space mechanism of panoptic surveillance—the three spaces being the apartment building, the street, *and* the bar and grill. Each space carries with it the purposes of surveillance, recruitment, and inspiring the economic and sexual dependence of black women. Recruitment seems especially important for the system's survival and perpetuation, for Junto makes particular use of members of the black community who are brought into his fold to enhance the scope of further surveillance and dependency-entrapment. Through these "minions"⁵⁰ (to use a gothically-charged term) Junto's system of surveillance, according to Hicks is exemplary of "the Foucauldian axiom that modern surveillance is internalized by contemporary subjects, producing in them a mode of self-regulation that serves power" (28). The recruited services of both Mrs.

⁵⁰One cannot help but notice a connection between these "minions" and "drivers," the black equivalent of overseers during pre-Emancipation slavery.

Hedges and Boots Smith in particular involve what Foucault calls “the disciplinary gaze” (174)—whether it be Mrs. Hedges’ general surveillance of the entire neighborhood, Boots’ particular staking out of Lutie, or Jones’ own obsessive voyeurism of Lutie. Their gazes, all of which ultimately serve the panopticism of Junto, demonstrate how it is often necessary “in order to increase its productive function” for the disciplinary gaze to be “broken down into smaller elements,” thus “specify[ing] the surveillance and mak[ing] it functional” (Foucault 174). In this way, they act as “drivers” in the service of the slaveowner and white supremacy.

The three spaces’ relationship with each other is more triangular than sequential, for once the system is created each space works in conjunction with the others as a circuit. However, it is clear that Junto’s Bar and Grill is the last stop in the system’s creation, the ground zero for determining the system’s function, so I will begin there. From the start, one should remember that the New Overseer’s particularly sexual targeting of black women is not necessarily a thing apart from his general targeting of the entire urban black populace. According to Hortense Spillers, a black woman’s body, as an object of dominant white subjugation, acts as a cluster of “captured sexualities” that provide a “physical and biological expression of ‘otherness’” (4); and, in its otherness, her captive body translates for the dominant culture into a “potential for pornotroping” that “embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general ‘powerless,’ resonating through various centers of human and social meaning” (206). This “pornotroping” seems a consequence of the “gaze” that Jacques Lacan describes as a function of the “dark God,” or the presence of the desire for the Other representing what the gazer lacks (275)—an attempt at reaffirming one’s sense of self and power through seeing in the other what one wishes to see, with the gaze itself becoming the more accurate object of desire (the *objet a*)

than what the gazer is directing the gaze upon (104).⁵¹ The black female body then becomes for the predatory New Overseer and his panoptic forces a kind of sexualized metonym, just another part and trajectory of his isolation, surveillance, and subjugation of the black migrant masses. This is a continuation, of course, of how female slaves were not only preyed upon by their white masters not just for sexual gratification, but as psychological tools to undermine the sense of manhood and assertive confidence in male slaves made incapable of both maintaining relationships and protecting their women, as Harriet Jacobs demonstrates in her narrative. Whether the object of control-by-surveillance be a single woman or an entire population, the intention is to isolate. Again, as a representative of the black populace, the black woman serves as a metonym for the white hegemony's desire for control; the attempt to control her represents the wish to control the entire black community.

Junto's Bar and Grill is perhaps the most sinister of the three spaces, for it through this bar and grill that he seems almost friendly, having opened up a local watering hole as a getaway for the poor black residents, even frequenting the place himself. He is, in fact, introduced in the novel as sitting in his own club and watching the customers. He certainly does not appear to be hiding. But Junto *is* hiding—in plain sight, in his unassuming conspicuousness; as Boots says, meditating on the subtlety of Junto's power, "He could sit forever at that table and nobody would look at him twice" (275). It is Junto's casualness that perhaps makes him even more maddening than the overseer of old; in her fear and hatred of Junto's power, and in her increasing awareness of his plans to isolate her, Lutie feels that Junto "could so casually, so lightly, perhaps at a mere whim, and not even aware of what he was doing, thrust her back into this place" (314), referring to her cramped apartment. Junto's Bar and Grill, then, is actually Junto's surveillance station,

⁵¹Lacan's description of the gaze in relation to the object of desire as "love and mutilation" (263) is perhaps all too appropriate when considering the fate of many female slaves bold enough to refuse their masters' advances.

where he can observe the local black population in a more concentrated, less scattered setting. The Junto is, according to Scott, “a kind of alternative space, offering its clientele the feeling of openness (in a mirrored wall), community, and good times” (107). Lutie, as she herself sits in the Junto and drinks a beer, understands the desperation motivating the local poor black residents to regularly come there:

They were there for the same reason that she was—because they couldn’t bear to look what they could see of the future smack in the face while listening to radios or trying to read an evening paper [...] No matter what it cost them, people had to come to places like the Junto, she thought. They had to replace the haunting silences of rented rooms and little apartments with the murmur of voices, the sound of laughter; they had to empty two or three glasses of liquid so they could believe in themselves again. (145-147)

In this way, not only is the population less scattered, but Junto could conceivably observe them one by one, single-file, as they enter. Even Junto’s huge mirror not only provides the place with a false sense of expansiveness (perhaps an added cruel joke, making the “relief” of the bar and grill not so open after all), but also aids in Junto’s surveillance of the black patrons; it only *appears* that the mirror, according to Lutie, “pushed the walls back and back into space [...] pushed the world of other people’s kitchen sinks back where it belonged and destroyed the existence of dirty streets and small shadowed rooms” (146), so that Junto, the Overseer, can better isolate them for his plans. Through this diabolically clever manipulation, along with his additional tactic of local recruitment, Junto is able to isolate and to get to know certain people of interest quite quickly and quite well. His specific interest appears, of course, to be the sexual

predation and exploitation of poor black women driven desperate by their bleak living conditions and lack of financial options. And he has his eyes on Lutie.

Though Junto may not be as obviously and directly racist or violent as Jacobs' Dr. Flint, he is nonetheless so. Also, Junto's willingness to socialize and cavort with black people (what Wright's panoptic white characters apparently are not willing to do, seeing it as beneath them) and his sexual interest in black women, though superficially making him appear more racially tolerant, is in fact motivated by the same predatory opportunism that moves Dr. Flint. As Hicks describes Junto's interest in Lutie, "despite his ostensible racial equanimity, [he] comes to gaze upon her as a whore because of a racist ideology that defines all black women that way" (23). Like Dr. Flint and his regaling of Harriet with promises of lavishly preferential treatment, Junto, in Lutie, is seeking to sexually capitalize upon her gender-based dependence and vulnerability within a place of social inequality, assuming that the gulf of socioeconomic difference between them will make her a more eager and easily-won sexual conquest.

What many of Junto's black customers do not realize is that, while he is the owner of the apparent boon their existence known as the Junto, he is also exploiting them through the same kind of housing discrimination and shoddy maintenance as portrayed by Wright in Native Son. It is a two-sided system that ensures the most convenient method of surveillance for Junto: create local living conditions so consistently poor as to unanimously attract all of the residents to the bar and grill! Thus, the site where black women such as Lutie feel the pressures that drive them toward dependence most acutely is, of course, the apartment building. Whereas Junto concentrates his own hands-on surveillance in his own bar and grill, making surveillance by recruited forces relatively unnecessary, he depends upon not only on recruited observational forces like that of Mrs. Hedges but (more darkly) also the men driven toward domestic abuse to,

through their unconscious complicity in the New Overseer's master plan, to drive unhappy and abused women out towards the relief of a space like the Junto.⁵² As subjects of persecution themselves, these men come to resemble the persecutor, especially through their persecution of women. The dominant culture's internalization mechanisms have further created within these black migrant men the stereotype they need to justify that white culture's destruction of those black men. Even the likes of Jones the Super, who does not live with Lutie but obsessively and voyeuristically spies on her, is unconsciously working in the interests of Junto. As Hicks points out, even though Jones seems to start out as Lutie's most immediate sexual oppressor and that he has no direct allegiance to Junto, by the conclusion of the novel, in his vengeful manipulation of Bub to unwittingly stealing mail, he demonstrates that he "has learned to marshal the powers of a white government against his victim, becoming complicit with its racist ideology" (23). On the local level, this marshalling of the white power structure more immediately links him, though still indirectly, with Junto; and his own sexual obsession with Lutie and attempted rape of her turns out to not only anticipate Junto's attempt to take advantage of her later in the text, but contribute as a force pushing Lutie away from her home and family toward the clutches of Junto as the greater, more systematic sexual oppressor.

Mrs. Hedges also functions as a kind of masculine gaze by proxy; for as Hicks also points out, though Mrs. Hedges initially functions as the primary figure of surveillance in the text, "we are ultimately made to understand that her complicity with the powerful white man Junto springs from a history of sexual marginalization" (23). As a victim of a disaster of housing

⁵²James Smethurst points out how Bigger Thomas comes to resemble the cruel and sadistic patriarchal figure (the monk, the baron, etc.) of the traditional European Gothic in the ways that he persecutes his own friends, family, and girlfriend (ultimately raping and murdering her), citing patriarchal tyranny and transgressive sexuality as two gothic staples in *Native Son* that generally accompany "relations of power, and an instability of markers of social identity, such as family, class, race, gender, and nationality" (29-30). A curious effect of the more subtle and insidious tyranny perpetrated by New Overseers such as Junto is how they seem to inspire, through their panoptic pressures, the more direct brutality of the older overseer within certain black migrant men.

discrimination herself, scarred for life by a tenement fire she managed to survive, Mrs. Hedges feels defeminized, even desexualized, thus tragically setting herself up for “masculinization” via an alliance with Junto, leading her both to become an agent of his “scopic regime” and “to gaze upon women like Lutie as sexual objects” (Hicks 33). On top of this masculinized role, Junto’s legal protection of the illegal services provided by Mrs. Hedges (madam of a brothel) is, in fact, an extension of his real estate practices, whose discriminatory methods create the kind of environment that ultimately drives black migrant women like Lutie toward the level of desperation that makes Mrs. Hedges’ offer of a job as a prostitute seem like a viable option.

Perhaps more so than Lutie (who is separated from her husband), Min demonstrates the depths of her dependence upon a man for security and survival in the harsh urban landscape of the new slavery. In spite of his hatred for her, Min is possessive of Jones and the money he saves her by her living with him and is, therefore, worried that his obsessive infatuation with the obviously more attractive Lutie will lead to his eventual kicking her out of his apartment. This is why she resorts, at the advice of Mrs. Hedges, to go to David the Prophet for magical paraphernalia to use against Jones—along the way, “determinedly repeating, ‘And I ain’t a-goin’ to be put out’” (122). But it dawns on Min, as evidenced by her increasing trepidation, that this visit to David is, in fact, “the first defiant gesture she had ever made” in her life (126); and this is where Petry reveals the true extent of Min’s grievances. This defiant gesture stands in sharp contrast to Min’s putting up with “the actions of cruelly indifferent employers” while doing part-time domestic work (126), with some of her female bosses having been “openly contemptuous women who laughed at her to her face even as they piled on more work,” leaving her—and notice the tellingly gothic language—“to be *buried* under the great mounds of dirty clothes [taking] days to work her way out from under them, getting no extra pay for the extra time

involved” (126, italics added). Then there are Min’s various, previous husbands who “had taken her money and abused her and given her nothing in return” (127). But this turns out to be a weak and not wholly autonomous defiance, for Min’s initial goal is not to leave Jones but to stay with him; her defiance is an aggressive move to *remain* in spite of Jones’ wishes! It is an ironic defiance that, in fact, reaffirms Min’s dependence on a man. And through Min, Petry makes the reasons for this dependence clear—if black men suffer greatly from the housing discrimination and urban segregation of the New Overseer, black women suffer even more so. Min wants—*needs*—to hang on to Jones and stay in his apartment “because there she was free from the yoke of that one word: *rent*,” that word meaning for her “padlocked doors with foul-mouthed landladies standing in front of them or sealed keyholes with marshals waving long white papers in their hands” (127, italics added). Min knows how single black women are viewed as especially easy pickings by predatory, opportunistic realtors and landlords; she knows how she stands no chance alone—that, by contrast, with “a man attached to her she could have an apartment,” which she goes so far as to call “a real home” (133), illustrating how black female migrants were left to settle for, even be delighted by, so little. This is why, even after she finally decides to leave Jones, Min nuzzles up to a strong-looking black pushcart man:

No, a woman living along really didn’t stand much chance. Landlords took advantage and wouldn’t fix things and landladies became demanding about the rent, waxing sarcastic if it was so much as a day behind time. With a man around, there was a big difference in their attitude. If he was a strong man like this one, they were afraid to talk roughly. (371)

And this advantage is often a purely psychological one; there is certainly no guarantee that the man to which a black migrant woman attaches herself will be of any directly *financial* help. As

evidenced by Lutie's ex-husband Jim and the already-mentioned Bill Smith, little to no work was available for black migrant men because of hiring discrimination and competition with poor whites. This often led male heads of households discouraged and frustrated to the point of loafing, alcoholism, domestic abuse, and (as was the case with Jim) looking for other women to replace the ones they have, whose employment and sole-breadwinner status offends their masculinity. Black migrant women, then, often find themselves between the rock of the white panoptic forces acting upon them as women and the hard place of the misdirected rage and abandonment—the result of those same white panoptic forces—of their men. And these are men that they, nonetheless, need.

What perhaps sheds further light on Junto's actual cruelty is how Lutie is not his only victim. The methodology of which the claustrophobic living conditions of the apartments and the relief of the Junto Bar and Grill consists involves, by its very nature, collateral damage. In order for Junto to find what he likes/wants in the local population, *everyone* must suffer and be driven to the Junto. Lutie even goes so far, in a particularly vivid metaphor, as to still liken him to the traditionally gothic patriarchal tormentor who is burying his victim alive: "Junto has a brick in his hand. Just one brick. The final one needed to complete the wall that had been building up around her for years, and when that one last brick was shoved in place, she would be completely walled in" (423). One cannot help but to recall Poe's "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" with Petry's choice of imagery.⁵³ And not only does Lutie feel like she is being walled in, but that "instead of her reaching out for the walls, the walls were reaching out for her—bending and swaying toward her in an effort to envelop her" (12), like the insidiously sliding walls of some sophisticated torture chamber, like the kind seen in another Poe story, "The

⁵³More seriously, Petry's choice of imagery also recalls the claustrophobia of the slave ship and the squalor of the slave quarters.

Pit and the Pendulum.”⁵⁴ Such claustrophobic imagery virtually litters The Street, making it clear that the key to Junto’s gothic sensibility as a New Overseer—how he is “felt” as a force of white panopticism—is the suffocating crampedness and feeling of being trapped in a confined space that he inspires in the poor black populace through the local system of urban segregation. That feeling of crampedness comes to affect Lutie so acutely that she, like the other black urban migrants who seem to carry the effects of their living spaces around with them, even feels closed in when outside of her apartment building—for example, by the mountains while riding around with Boots in his car (159-160). Within Junto’s particular panoptic system, the apartments throughout Harlem are, as Lutie says, “nothing but traps” (73), with the tenants inhabiting them having the uneasy premonition of a future of their being “caged” (147) in them. Lutie also seems to understand the darkly transformative potential in Junto’s indirect approach to gothic confinement, how the street’s more monstrous and grotesque inhabitants are “the result of electric light instead of hot, strong sunlight” (248-249).

Characters in other Petry works make it clear that cramped apartment spaces have a lot to do with their general sense of injustice. In “In Darkness and Confusion,” for instance, William blames a lot of the negative influences that the street has had on his son Sam on the living space in which his son grew up, one not big enough “for a man to move around in without bumping into something” (261), thus forcing him out toward the mercies of the street. Again, one can clearly see the line of commonality between the old slavery’s detriment to African-American families and communities and that of the urban North’s new slavery, whose effects and methodology are far more insidious and environmental. Indeed, according to Shockley, Petry demonstrates in The Street how the horrible conditions of urban segregation and environmental racism “turn[s] the home ideal on its head” (446), robbing the domestic space of the sense of

⁵⁴Clearly, Wright was not the only one of these authors influenced by the work of Poe.

protection and privacy necessary to comfortably and healthily raise a family. Having Mrs. Hedges surveying nosiness particularly in mind, Lutie concludes: “Living here is like living in a structure that has a roof, but no partitions, so that privacy is destroyed, and even the sound of one’s breathing becomes a known, familiar thing to each and every tenant” (313).

The thinness of the walls also creates a kind of accidental surveillance by the tenants of each other, destroying all sense of the privacy that the space of a home is supposed to afford. This thinness is especially unnerving when violent domestic disputes occur, such as the unemployed Bill Smith’s routine of coming home drunk and beating up his wife (313). Such events are especially painful to Lutie as a mother because they terrify her son, even more so because Lutie has to work and thus has no choice but to leave him there alone (the temporary abandonment which heartbreakingly foreshadows the more permanent abandonment). Such occurrences demonstrate the added edge to what a black migrant faces if she happens to be a woman—as a potential sexual victim, as a concerned mother, and as the recipient of the displaced and misdirected rage of their husbands or boyfriends, also black, whose sense of manhood is perpetually injured by the dominant white culture’s denying them the dignity of employment and self-sufficiency. Petry’s gender, as well her focus on women in her novel, allow for her to give a greater voice, through Lutie and even less prominent characters such as Min, to women such as Bessie in Native Son and Lil in Lawd Today! whose victimhood is perhaps not given as much due diligence by their male creator, Richard Wright.

The third space, the street, is perhaps the most abstract. As a space, it represents what is denied African-American migrants as well as the limitations placed upon him/her within white panopticism to maintain the norms and supremacy of the dominant white culture. From the balcony from which she observes the street and the neighborhood, Mrs. Hedges actually

occupies a space between the street and the apartment building. Given that it is through his acquaintance with Mrs. Hedges that Junto begins his panoptic existence within (and apart from, and over) the local black community, one could argue that the street is the space where it all begins. If crime and illegal businesses are representative consequences of the street as a transformative force, and if it is his lasting business relationship with Mrs. Hedges that allows for the development and dissemination of Junto's panoptic power, then the street is certainly the part of the three-space mechanism where Junto initially gets his foothold and establishes his panoptic status—according to Heather Hicks, what makes him “omnipresent and insidious” and leads to the “increasingly abstract, disembodied quality” (28) that defines him as a New Overseer. However, there would be a considerable amount of wishful thinking on Mrs. Hedges' part to assume that she and Junto are equal partners, and that he is racially color-blind. Her business as well as her surveillance is ultimately on behalf of Junto, who controls the local economy in Harlem. As Hicks points out:

Junto himself profits from the segregation enabled by this culture of surveillance by economically manipulating Harlem's captive consumer base [...] no matter which interpretation one brings to Junto's ostensible color-blindness, it is crucial to understand that his actions remain contextualized by the rigid hierarchy that the system of white power holds in place. (29)

Thus, Mrs. Hedges provides quite a different example of a black woman's dependence on a man. In her case, that man is white—and not just any white man but *the* white man, Junto. It is Junto who makes the local police ignore Mrs. Hedges' ring of prostitution. Whether she realizes it or not (and whether she likes it or not), she is an agent of Junto. From the beginning, given her

usefulness in what she could offer him in terms of understanding the traumatic disillusionment in the local black migrant population, Junto has recruited her.

Mrs. Hedges had a rather direct hand in this development, acting as a kind of mentor for the enterprising Junto; one can see the origins of the methodology behind his system of panoptic manipulation in Mrs. Hedges' cynical advice to him:

She told Junto people had to dance and drink and make love in order to forget their troubles and that bars and dance halls and whorehouses were the best possible investments. Slowly and cautiously Mr. Junto had become the owner of all three, though he still controlled quite a bit of real estate. (251)

However, it is clear that, as Scott points out, that although Mrs. Hedges organizes and oversees the ring of prostitution, “it is Junto, her business partner, who provides the infrastructure for the operation” (107). For her, Junto is an exception as a white man; though she generally has “no use” for white people and does not want them “anywhere near” her, she puts up with Junto, as she tells him, “because you don’t ever stop to think whether folks are white or black and you don’t really care” (251). In spite of her arguably “making” of him with her cynical advice about manipulating the local community, Junto has made her no less dependent upon him for both legal protection and self-validation. Though not sexually sought after, she is still exploited, even within the recruitment that misleads her towards a false comfort within an ostensible freedom. As for Mrs. Hedges' role as madam of her brothel, though she may at first appear to be the one ultimately responsible for selecting Lutie as a prospect-target for her prostitution ring—with Lutie's “thick, soft hair” offering “great possibilities for making money” (256)—she is doing so specifically with Junto's interests in mind. This reaffirms and solidifies her status as a recruited minion of Junto, and it should be remembered that recruitment is a key resource in defining the

difference between the New Overseer and the old one. The old overseer simply did not have the tool of recruitment—certainly not on the same scale, beyond his use of individual black “drivers,” as the New Overseer in his more industrialized and sophisticated urban environment. The old overseer had only the plantation, whereas the New Overseer has the entire cityscape for his panoptic playground—complete with law, employment, and housing systems working in his favor across a much more vast and daunting grid.

The panoptic design of the street is what Lutie means when she describes how the streets are “no accident,” a creation of “the *North* lynch mobs” (323, italics added), whose malice is far less direct and more intricate than their southern counterparts. Typical of disillusioned black migrants confronting the new slavery of the urban North, Lutie feels that there is no escape, like she has been “hemmed into an ever-narrowing space” from the day she was born (323).⁵⁵ In spite of his less obvious violence, especially when comparing him to the far more directly and physically abusive Dr. Flint, Junto still represents “the implacable figure of a white man blocking the way, so that it was impossible to escape” (315). Junto is no less sinister and dangerous. In his aura of ubiquity, he seems to be the avatar of the very “street” to which Lutie attributes all of the forces acting against her and other urban black migrants.

Junto’s subtle maneuvering of Lutie toward sexual and financial dependence upon him culminates in his taking advantage of the Super’s getting her son arrested. He tries to make having sex with him light compensation for his possible freeing of Bub and improvement of her lifestyle. As Boots Smith explain to Lutie, “All you got to do is be nice to him as long as he wants and the two hundred bucks is yours. And bein’ nice to Junto pays off better than anything

⁵⁵Petry’s imagery of being hemmed is reminiscent of similar claustrophobic and suffocating imagery in Larsen’s *Quicksand*. In New York, for instance, Helga feels “shut in, trapped” (47), and this feeling seems to follow her wherever she goes; upon her returning to New York from Copenhagen, she leaves her apartment in a panic, feeling that she “must get out or [she’ll] choke” (110).

else I know” (421). This cold-blooded willingness to manipulate black female subjects through their children defines the particularly diabolical lengths to which the New Overseer is willing to go to get what he wants—again, with Junto’s relatively less brutal approach making him no less evil. Notice how the climax of The Street, Lutie’s killing of Boots Smith, comes shortly after Boots and (one can assume) Junto become aware of Lutie’s motherhood and the incarceration of her child. Lutie has to go to Boots for the two hundred dollars to pay for a lawyer for Bub, who has been set up by the Super to unwittingly commit mail theft. Boots’ cold, predatory opportunism rears its head upon his finding out that Lutie has a child, and this is not entirely lost on Lutie:

His face had changed while she talked to him. Ordinarily his expression was unreadable; now he looked as though he had suddenly seen something he had been waiting for, seen it spread right out in front of him, and it was something that he wanted badly [...] He hadn’t known about Bub. She had forgotten that she hadn’t told him she had a child. (400)

Also, after Boots tells her that he will have the money for her the next night, Lutie worries that his agreeing to do so had been “too easy, much too easy” (401). Shortly after, and having very likely been positioned to do so, Mrs. Hedges then mentions Junto after finding out from Lutie about Bub’s incarceration—“A friend of mine, a Mr. Junto—a very nice white gentleman, dearie” (417)—insinuating that Junto would pay well for Lutie’s services as a prostitute. Lutie then realizes that Junto had not wanted to pay her for singing in Boots’ band; that sort of compensation would have lent Lutie a degree of independence and mobility quite counter to his plans for her. Such subtle and unscrupulous manipulations make Junto and his minions, for Lutie, the very avatars of the street that she abstractly blames for everything working against her

freedom, security, and happiness. The street, then, is the zone of negative influence upon black migrants, where they are transformed for the worse.

In the case of Boots Smith, who also acts as a recruited agent, Junto is far more direct (as opposed to his approach with Mrs. Hedges) in communicating the true inequality within their relationship. In sensing competition in Boots' desire for Lutie, he reminds Boots of, before he had hired him to play piano for him, Boots was a poor Pullman porter, starving and playing in dives and putting up with the insults of white patrons; he tells Boots, bluntly, "I made you" (264). Deciding that Lutie would not be worth the loss of Junto's favors to him, Boots falls back in line and continues his role in Junto's plot to financially isolate Lutie—first with promises of singing work that turns out to not pay, then to coldly taking advantage of her son's incarceration. With the former, Lutie demonstrates a vague sense of Boots' link as a recruit to the devious power of Junto: "And time and Boots Smith and Junto had pushed her right back in here, deftly removing that obscuring cloud of dreams" (311-312). But this link, again, is not one of equality, as was the case with Mrs. Hedges. Perhaps more so than any other character, Boots demonstrates the ultimate usefulness of minions to Junto—to take the fall for him, which, according to Shockley, is exactly what Boots does (455). Even as she is bashing his head in after he has struck her and attempted to rape her, Lutie knows that it is not really Boots who she is repeatedly striking with the iron candlestick but "the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape; and at the turn-of-events which had forced her to leave Bub alone while she was working so that he now faced reform school, how had a police record" (430). And who best represents and typifies that white world with its enclosing panoptic forces in The Street? The white man in the next room waiting to take sexual advantage of her, Junto, who manages to elude such a gruesome end. As a recruited force, and through

Lutie's killing of him, Boots, in fact, takes the fall for Junto, demonstrating the use that the New Overseer can draw even from the ultimate, sacrificial expendability of the black recruit.

Lutie's awareness of Junto's panoptic power increases incrementally, and it climaxes in the form of a revelatory hallucination; she realizes that the "creeping, silent thing" (418) that she had sensed in the movie theater and in the beauty parlor was now in her living room, in the form of Junto sitting on the studio couch. Though she quickly realizes that this is just a figment of her imagination, the real Junto turns out to be actually waiting for her in Boots' apartment the next night, when she returns to get the two hundred dollars Boots had promised. This materialization of *the* source of all that has apparently been working against her provides for the *true* horror of The Street and Lutie's understanding of that horror. But before this horror is to be explored and defined further, it is necessary to point out Petry's particular strategy for highlighting this *real* horror of the text—by first providing an arguably more simplistic and clichéd version of the Gothic, a version that provides something of a stylistic diversion.

II. *The Gothic Diversion*

Slavery, again, as a central and often-explored subject of the American Gothic, is much more strikingly real-life and closer to home in its horror. The methods of torture, both physical and psychological, within it, if it were not all so true, as documented in the various slave narratives, remind one of the sort of sensationalist violence found in the traditional European Gothic. Slavery, however, has that much more poignantly felt "too soon" factor, especially given how its historical resonance is felt even today. Harriet Jacobs' description of her extended stay in the attic space, for example, in spite of its seriousness and verisimilitude, almost reads like the prototypically gothic storyline of a powerful and sadistic male pursuer tormenting a

hapless maiden by imprisoning her in a dungeon or the castle catacombs; as Jacobs concludes, “He had an iron will, and was determined to keep me, and to conquer me” (176). At one point, Jacobs even specifically refers to this hiding place as “my dungeon” (277); indeed, her incredibly long stay is a kind of self-imposed prison sentence. And it is Dr. Flint’s vindictive machinations that have put her in this position of torment. As Jacobs describes, “To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total [...] The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and I slept such sleep as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them” (262). Not only does she have “to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light” and endure being bitten by “hundreds of little red insects” (264), but she also has to hide from her own children (263). This is not only echoed by Petry in the claustrophobia of Lutie’s apartment building; it evokes the sort of ordeals associated with torturous and inhumane imprisonment—the hot box, or the live burial (such as only up to the neck, or a momentary underground burial—both of which are known to involve agitated vermin), making Dr. Flint into a kind of inquisitor/master torturer once removed.

Fittingly, Petry does not make much of a leap for anyone to detect the Gothic in The Street.⁵⁶ She outdoes Jacobs, however, in deliberately gothic coloration; it seems her desire to make it so obvious as to be downright campy.⁵⁷ Petry does not make it hard for readers to see Jones the Super as a vampire; she appears, in fact, to be deliberately leading readers in that direction. Jones’ deep revulsion at the sight of the big golden cross that Min hangs over her headboard, given to her by the “root doctor” David the Prophet (140), and the hissing sound Jones makes when Min makes the sign of the cross at him (358) particularly evoke the

⁵⁶Jackson calls The Street Petry’s “book of social criticism and macabre tragedy” (227).

⁵⁷To a subtler degree, this diversionary tactic of placing the clichéd Gothic before the truer horror within the text shows up in other works by Petry as well. Take, for instance, how “Like a Winding Sheet,” a story that will end in domestic violence, begins with Johnson, the perpetrator of that violence, having the feeling that he should not leave the house because it is Friday the 13th.

superstitious and clichéd stuff of horror cinema; and, in a nightmare of Lutie's, Jones and his dog "become one" and bite her arm off, calling to mind the animal transformations in such prototypical works as Bram Stoker's Dracula. Jones' underground-ness, which has apparently been a required condition of every job he has ever held, certainly makes him seem like one of the undead; and Petry's descriptions of him are at times corpse-like, with his "dull, scarred, worn flesh" and knuckles that are "knobs that stood out under the skin" (12). Such dwellings as he is accustomed to occupying—be they cellars, basements, furnaces, or ship holds—certainly evoke the crypt, or at least an underground cave, both typical haunts for vampires. However, this apparent campiness precludes and highlights the truer horror of Lutie having to abandon her son at the novel's conclusion.

Jones is not the only encrypted member of the undead for Petry. Just as she has Jones transform into a vicious dog in Lutie's nightmare, she has the entire local populace do some nocturnal shape-shifting as well in that same nightmare, just before Lutie awakens in terror:

She screamed and screamed and windows opened and the people poured out of the buildings—thousands of them, millions of them. She saw that they had turned to rats. The street was so full of them that she could hardly walk. They swarmed around her, jumping up and down. Each one had a building chained to its back, and they were all crying, "Unloose me! Unloose me!" (193)

And such vampiric imagery, for Petry, is not exclusive to The Street; in her short story about the 1943 Harlem riot, "In Darkness and Confusion," a key reason that the street inhabited by he and his family is not "a good [one] to live on" is the "shadowy, vague shapes" emerging from the darkness, "lurking near the trees" and "dodging behind them," and the "disembodied figures" in the street that "slept" in the morning (260). However, Petry's heavy-handed gothic window-

dressing provides a purposefully transparent symbolism; just as she makes recognizing certain superficial features of The Street as gothic not much of a reach, she also does not make it hard to ascertain the metaphorical significance of her characters' vampirism, undead-ness, and underground-ness. The characters' monstrosity is indicative of their being darkly transformed by malignant external forces within their environment, all of which can be traced back to some white hegemonic power manipulating them for its own interests. Indeed, this sense of external forces acting upon unwitting victims calls to mind naturalism while replacing it with the Gothic's sense of a more materialized source of those forces. This increased tangibility of the source of those forces points toward the conclusion that The Street favors the gothic over the naturalistic, as Evie Shockley appears to believe in her summation that The Street is a tale of "Harlem's horrors" with the "street" representing the new medieval monastery, convent, or dungeon as the new site for panoptic female victimization (439).

With Jones in particular, Petry makes it clear that Jones' grotesque appearance as well as his sexual obsession with Lutie stem from the prejudicial treatment he has suffered at the hands of the dominant white culture for all of his life. Limited job opportunities had led him first to working in a ship's hold, in which he felt "buried alive"⁵⁸ (86), and that live burial would continue throughout his life in the subterranean dwellings he had to inhabit as the superintendent of various buildings. His worn hands and knobby knuckles are the result of years of "hauling ashes [and] shoveling coal" (12); and Mrs. Hedges perhaps sums it up best when she concludes that Jones' living "in basements such a long time" has made him "queer," with "notions in his head about things" (114). More succinctly, after hearing Jones' dog howl after Jones has kicked it, she says that he is "cellar crazy" (301). He had done so, tellingly, because Lutie's son Bub

⁵⁸This is obviously evocative of a central theme (perhaps "obsession" is the better word) of Edgar Allan Poe. Evie Shockley, in fact, made it the title of her work on The Street, "Buried Alive: Gothic Homelessness, Black Women's Sexuality and (Living) Death in Ann Petry's The Street."

had quickly run off, having refused Jones' devious offer of "detective work," actually a ruse of vengeance against Lutie to lure Bub into stealing mail and getting arrested. Similarly, Lutie feels that Jones is "something less than human" for his having been "chained to buildings until he was like an animal" (191). Jones, then, was not born a monster, but made into one, his evilness the direct result of what has been denied him in terms of professional and socioeconomic mobility, as well as a comfortable living space. The same goes for the rest of the inhabitants of "the street," especially the kind the "shadowy" and "disembodied" kind mentioned by William in "In Darkness and Confusion."

Lutie too, in The Street, notices the vampire-like nocturnal criminals, but more clearly voices an understanding of what made them the way they are—that they "carr[y] with them the horror of the places they lived in, places like her own apartment" (153); and this is but a more sinister extension of what she notices earlier while riding a very crowded train—with its passengers maintaining their own "private worlds" to create the "illusion of space between them and their fellow passengers" (27), and the crowd obviously feeling happier and freer as it expands off the train and out of the station (58). Petry also demonstrates an awareness of how otherwise decent people can be driven to monstrosity in her short story "Like a Winding Sheet" as well, with the main character Johnson, who will ultimately turn to brutally beating his wife Mae at the end of the story, appearing at the beginning of the story wrapped in his bedsheet "like a winding sheet," or a "shroud" (199)—again, a representation of someone who was "buried alive" and thus driven to desperate and misdirected measures. Given this apparent warping of otherwise upstanding characters towards violent and criminal behavior, one can see Petry's strong candidacy for major realism/naturalism author. However, clearly at work upon her are the very human sources of Junto and his minions.

Mrs. Hedges and Min are also ingeniously rendered by Petry so as to initially appear simplistic in their gothic representation. Upon Lutie's first encounter with her, Mrs. Hedges seems downright witch-like—a "snake charmer," as Lutie puts it, who "sat in her window in order to charm away at the snakes, the wolves, the foxes, the bears that prowled and loped and crawled on their bellies through the jungle of 116th Street" (8). Like a sorceress, Mrs. Hedges possesses a seeming omniscience and demonstrates a powerful sense of influence and control over the neighborhood she continuously surveys. The power she exercises over Jones, especially in her prevention of his attempted rape of Lutie, is particularly striking. And the almost ghoulishly ugly Min resorts to a form of voodoo or black magic in her visit to the "Prophet," David, and her acquisition from him of the red liquid, candles, powder, and big golden cross she will use against Jones (135)—all in order to protect herself against Jones' violent outbursts and the possibility of his kicking her out of his apartment.

Very early on in The Street, and after her first encounters with Jones, Mrs. Hedges and Min, Lutie has a sense of "the street" as a darkly transformative force; the significance of the physical and moral distortion that the three of them have experienced is not lost on Lutie. However, though she is aware, Lutie is also foreshadowingly dismissive of the street's warping effects:

the same combination of circumstances had evidently made the Mrs. Hedges who sat in the street-floor window turn to running a fairly well-kept whorehouse—but unmistakably a whorehouse; and the superintendent of the building—well, the street had pushed him into basements away from light and air until he was being eaten up by some horrible obsession; and still other streets had turned Min, the woman who lived with him, into a drab drudge so spineless and so limp she was

like a soggy dishrag. None of those things would happen to her, Lutie decided, because she would fight back and never stop fighting back. (57)

We find out that even Lutie, in her earlier days with her ex-husband Jim, had resorted to taking in and exploiting State children as income, even though for Lutie it “didn’t seem quite right that two grown people and another child should be living on the money that was supposed to be used exclusively for the State children” (170). Though certainly doing better than Jones, Mrs. Hedges, and Min in appearance, it soon becomes obvious that Lutie’s denial of the street’s having any effect on her, and thus her belief that she can succeed in combating its forces, is wishful thinking on her part. Again, those “forces” have a human source, and this human source has very specific intentions for Lutie. Such intentions make Junto seem like the stalker, would-be rapist, and sadistic patriarch of archetypal gothic literature—a dimension of Petry’s Gothicism that demonstrates the fine line between the campy and the more realistically appropriate.

There is a hint of her obviously including herself in her statement, “No one could live on a street like this and stay decent” (229), when onlookers show no interest in a poor-looking woman’s having had her purse snatched; they appear, in fact, to even be annoyed by it. Lutie apparently does not realize that by “no one” she is including herself. The point, of course, is that no one is safe. The more obvious monstrosity and disfigurement of such extreme characters—or rather, gothic clichés—as Jones, Mrs. Hedges and Min is then metaphorically indicative of a much more general monstrosity and corruption within the entire urban populace. This populace shares a common victimhood through the white panoptic forces acting upon them, drastically reducing their choices and routes for social mobility and socioeconomic escape, thus driving them toward the evil of fewer healthy alternatives for such. The source of these panoptic forces

is Junto, owner of Junto's Bar and Grill, and his tactics—as well as his particular targeting of Lutie—make for an especially revealing examination of the New Overseer's ingenuity.

III. The Horrible Choice

According to Foucault, the “delinquency from above [is] the source of misery and the principle of revolt for the poor” (287). This explains the motivation behind the “terrible honesty” of African-American literary protagonists in their often violent actions against the white panoptic forces working against them. But the extent and magnitude of those forces are simply too overwhelming to combat; furthermore, the New Overseer's strategy of recruitment provides a disorienting line of false equivalence between himself and the delinquent forces that he enlists. Those delinquent forces are made up of members of the same community that he oppresses and exploits, so his recruiting of them is nothing more than another trajectory of that oppression and exploitation; and the false equivalence allows for those recruits to take the fall for him as he conveniently slips away. As is demonstrated by Bigger in his murder of Bessie and by Lutie in her murder of Boots, the target of such protagonists' “terribly honest” revolts are often such fall-taking recruits—members of their own community who, in their recruited service for the New Overseer, are actually just as oppressed and exploited as they are.

What Petry demonstrates, especially through Johnson (from “In Darkness and Confusion”) and Boots Smith, is how black migrant women are perhaps more intensely targeted within white panopticism because both black and white *men* use women—black women—to contest their senses of manhood and power. Given the white power structure's historical targeting of black men's sense of adult, patriarchal masculinity—a patriarchal masculinity that apparently, and unfortunately, must involve the sexual conquest of women—the reasserted

confidence and rebellion of characters such as Bigger and Boots must involve the sacrifice of black *women's* sense of sexual freedom and integrity. Even within his service to Junto, Boots demonstrates aggressively vengeful feelings toward white people, especially while driving in his car, as Lutie notices:

And she knew, too, that this was the reason white people turned scornfully to look at Negroes who swooped past them on the highways. "Crazy niggers with autos" in the way they looked. Because they sensed that the black men had to roar past them, had for a brief moment to feel equal, feel superior; had to take reckless chances going around curves, passing on hills, so that they would be better able to face a world that took pains to make them feel that they didn't belong, that they were inferior. (157-158)

More sinister towards Lutie, however, is how Boots demonstrates a vengeful wish towards Junto in his aggressive attempt to have sex with her before Junto does:

He closed the door quietly behind Junto. He hadn't intended to in the beginning, but he was going to trick him and Junto would never know the difference. Sure, Lutie would sleep with Junto, but he was going to have her first. He thought of the thin curtains blowing in the wind. Yeah, he can have the leavings. After all, he's white and this time a white man can have a black man's leavings [...] Junto had pushed him hard, threatened him, nagged him about Lutie Johnson. This would be his revenge. (423)

But the result of this racially-motivated vengeance is not Junto directly, but Lutie as an object sexual stake-claiming; and Lutie's reaction is not against Junto directly, but the more immediate threat of Boots. The terrible revolts of characters such as Lutie, Boots, and Bigger, then, miss

the true source of oppression entirely and are instead misdirected towards black-on-black violence and murder. Through his ingenious system of recruitment, the New Overseer has arranged so that, in their intended targeting of him, the reactionary forces of black insurrection often end up consuming members of their own community and not the real forces of white panoptic power. Petry also demonstrates this hopeless impotence of black migrant revolt in her other works, such as in “In Darkness and Confusion,” which is a fictional depiction of the 1943 Harlem riot sparked by the rumor of a white cop’s shooting of a black soldier. Seeing the frightened white faces “with satisfaction” (284) the black mob pushes forward with increasing mass and intensity, indiscriminately smashing, among other things, store-fronts in their path. Even the usually mild-mannered William and his sickly wife Pink are enthusiastically swept up in the riot’s force, with William even proud of Pink as she smashes store-fronts. However, as the adrenaline apparently ebbs, William loses strength and feels more and more like he is “in a nightmare” (288), and Pink ultimately collapses and dies (295).

But William and Pink’s shared motivation for getting involved in the riot is the news given to William by son Sam’s friend Scummy that Sam, who is now in the army, was shot, court-martialed, and given twenty years hard labor for not going to the “nigger end” of the bus (268). This provides the consummation of all of their parental fears concerning Sam, not only in terms of the street’s possible influence upon him but of the possible violent consequences of white discrimination against him in a place like Georgia, where he was stationed. Like Lutie with Bub, William and Pink worry about the prospects of a young man like Sam’s being raised in “hell-hole flats” (278) and growing up to have “a woman to beat” (279)—ending up like Bigger and Boots, for example. They have long wanted to move for his sake but, of course, cannot. This financial and socioeconomic incapability demonstrates what is perhaps the most cruel facet

of white panoptic strategies—that of manipulating and persecuting black migrants through their families, especially through their children. And, again, however righteous this motivation for vengeance might seem, Petry—as well as Wright—show little faith, at least in their literary representations, in the possibility of triumph in the face of the New Overseer’s juggernaut force. For instance, during Pink’s most majestically violent moment—of tearing away the gate to the liquor store and yelling to everyone to drink up—Petry indicates that the gate had “won” anyway, given Pink’s resulting weakness and the blood dripping from her hands (293-294). Though the gate represented for Pink “the world that had taken her son” and she “was wreaking vengeance on it” (294), the world that it represents clearly, and horribly, wins. A comment made by a nurse to Pink when she had lost her last child is recalled by William—“You people have too many children anyway” (284)—and illustrates the sense of cheapness and expendability with which the dominant white power structure views black migrant life. And the machinations of Junto upon Lutie demonstrate how the New Overseer of that power structure is willing to use and manipulate that black life for its own sinister purposes and desires.⁵⁹

According to Petry herself, in a 1946 interview with James Ivey for The Crisis, her making of Lutie Johnson into “an intelligent, ambitious, attractive woman with a fair degree of education” was part of her aim “to show how simply and easily the environment can change the course of a person’s life”; more particularly, she wanted to show “why the Negro has a high crime rate, a high death rate, and little or no chance of keeping his family unit intact in large northern cities” (71). Even with the intellectual and moral superiority she holds over the likes of Bigger Thomas, Lutie nonetheless falls victim to the very human machinations that make up that

⁵⁹This panoptic unscrupulousness is perhaps anticipated by Jacobs in her disturbing account of the fake letter sent by Dr. Flint to her grandmother, trying to have Jacobs’ children sent up North. He is clearly not above using Jacobs’ children and her sense of motherhood against her. The threat to her children, especially Dr. Flint’s plan to have them sent with her to the plantation to be “broke in” (238) is what finally spurs Jacobs into making her escape and resorting to the desperate plan of hiding in the attic.

“environment.” Lawrence P. Jackson sees this as the key to how The Street manages to express “more direct bitterness than had been in the pages of Native Son” (232). Lutie’s fate in particular, though she manages to save herself from Boots and ultimately Junto, illustrates how white panopticism specifically targets black migrant women as sexual prey and commodities and, like Jacobs’ Dr. Flint of old, has no qualms with using the instinctual pressures and obligations of family ties, especially maternal ties, to manipulate and isolate those black migrant women. And the often criminal extremes to which these women are driven serve to only confirm and perpetuate the dominant culture’s negative stereotypes of them; as Scott points out, Lutie’s killing of Boots serves as “a realization and fruition of her ultimate destiny [...] to become a criminal (a criminal, a negligent mother, a victim of her own unrealistic aspirations)” (111). It is further heartbreaking how Lutie, as Thelma J. Shinn describes most Petry protagonists, is “the individual with the most integrity [who] is not only destroyed but is often forced to become an expression of the very society against which [she] is rebelling” (110). Of course, Lutie is not literally destroyed, but she is forced to become the abandoning mother in spite of her refusal to compromise her sexuality.⁶⁰ To escape, Lutie is put into the position of making a horrible choice—the thing unspeakable for a mother to do, abandon her child. The extremity of her decision, however, perhaps says less about her qualifications as a mother than it does about the levels of evil and malice within the system she must negotiate.

⁶⁰According to Jackson, Lutie’s sex drive is sublimated as opposed to the other characters in the novel who are dominated by theirs (230).

Chapter Four: “The New Root”

Of the three authors, Ralph Ellison perhaps represents the most clear-cut and self-conscious rewriting of the slave narrative and the naturalistic African-American migration narrative for the mid-twentieth century with Invisible Man. Ellison’s novel shares in common with Wright’s Native Son and Petry’s The Street the story of a black migrant’s disillusioning confrontation with the northern urban environment, as well as the presence of a white panoptic influence within that environment, but this panopticism is perhaps most central to Ellison’s work. In fact, it is specifically brought up within the novel. Ellison’s “invisible” protagonist encounters one of the black veterans he had first seen at the Golden Day bar again on the bus headed North. This vet explains to him not only how Washington is “just another southern town” (154), but also warns the narrator about what “*they*” might do to him up there—“they” being “the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances—the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more [...] The big man who’s never there, where you think he is” (154). The “white folks” and “authority” is indeed a clarification of what they so closely precede, the “gods, fate [and] circumstances”—providing what is perhaps the most explicit proof among the three authors of an awareness within the text of white panoptic power.

As an individual, what Ellison’s narrator particularly feels being put upon and ascribed to him by the New Overseer is “invisibility”—that is, a refusal of others, especially white people, to truly see him. This invisibility seems related to the “melting pot” to which the vet refers when he warns the narrator of venturing up North—“out of the fire and into the melting pot” (152).

This “melting pot” is, of course, one of those enduring poetic images of America as a land of supposed equality. However, the notion of invisibility points to the risk within this image to oversimplify the idea of equality and pervert its meaning towards homogeneity, voicelessness, and expendability—everything that denies the individual character, freedom, and even life.

Under the endorsement of the doctrine of the melting pot, the white hegemony thus legitimizes its practices of panoptic surveillance by minimizing the importance of the individual. Sanctified under the cover of this tacit pseudo-patriotism, the forces of white panopticism can thus observe and locate with greater ease any individuals who “step out of line.” More sinisterly, then, invisibility on the part of the New Overseer may not, after all, be an ignorant assumption against African-American individuality, but a deliberate strategy against that individuality to quell in advance any potential threats against white hegemonic power.

The motive behind Ellison’s increased specificity of the humanity behind these “forces” is perhaps made clear through the limitations he saw in the naturalistic approach, as he expresses in Shadow and Act:

Thus to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom, I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction. I was to dream of a prose which was flexible, and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity and individual self-realization. (105)

Ellison’s problems with naturalism, therefore, are not only that its free-floating and seemingly nonhuman nature runs the risk of masking the true *human* source of the forces acting upon the

individual migrant, but that its bleakness offers for him as an author no alternatives for the ingenuity of the American individual. For Ellison, this “invisibility” that white panoptic power has forced upon the black migrant population to stifle individuality has clearly replaced the more nebulous forces of naturalism. What happens to the black migrant population, both collectively and individually, is no accident of fate, and there are specific, human perpetrators behind the “forces” acting upon that population.

Accordingly, like James Baldwin, Ellison took considerable issue with Wright’s apparent dismissal of individuality—*black* individuality—in works like Native Son and Black Boy. Viewing Native Son as an example of the “protest novel,” Baldwin saw a failure in its “rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (“Everybody’s Protest Novel” 1659). Ellison saw a similar, presumptuous monolithism in Black Boy. At first, he seems to offer a token of understanding by granting that Wright’s experience as a black migrant was somewhat typical and representative:

For certainly in the historical sense Wright is no exception. Born on a Mississippi plantation, he was subjected to all those blasting pressures which in a scant eighty years have sent the Negro people hurtling, without clearly defined trajectory, from slavery to emancipation, from log cabin to city tenement, from the white folks’ fields and kitchens to factory assembly lines, and which, between two wars, have shattered the wholeness of its folk consciousness into a thousand writhing pieces. (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 131)

However, Ellison insists that “*Black Boy* describes this process in the personal terms of *one* Negro childhood” (131), that individuality should not be lost within common experience.

Ellison's decisions in developing his protagonist reflect his own steps in moving away from the influence of Wright, demonstrating, according to Jackson, his fear of being deemed "simply another protest writer, wrapped in the shroud of Richard Wright" (Ralph Ellison 393-394). Initially, this stemmed from, according to Jackson, Ellison's private reservations concerning the "bitter pessimism about the American scene" and "reluctance to show an optimistic hero contending with postwar philosophical tools" (204) demonstrated in Wright's work. But later, after the Harlem riot of 1943, Ellison himself had grown more pessimistic, as Jackson writes: "Less and less did he feel that black life was a journey [...] Ellison thought of black life as a maze" (373). Nonetheless, by the time he had finished writing and publishing Invisible Man, Ellison was hoping for "a different sort of triumph [...] a success that while not necessarily refusing liberal largesse, would enable him to stand as an independent artist and not the icon of a social movement" (327). The individual, then, is what Ellison ultimately decided to make his focus, by means of a style much more absurd and surreal than that of Wright. He, of course, understood the risks in doing so—with the "black Left," according to Jackson, concluding that he was merely "trying to earn bourgeoisie success by way of abstract symbolism" and the "radicals accus[ing] him of being an Uncle Tom and a sellout" (Indignant Generation 359). But, as Ellison demonstrates by projecting through his "invisible" narrator, individualism proves to be a potential strategy *against* the New Overseer, whose strategies of corralling and surveillance essentially assume that all members of the black population it seeks to control are the same. Such essentializing pressures also find their way, via internalization, into the black population itself, creating a form of unconscious self-policing that further adds to individual marginalization within communities and further ensures the success of the New Overseer's strategy of Label, Isolate and Control. Such a new and sophisticated updating of the

old plantation owner's slavery and the old overseers' panoptic strategies demands an equally subtle (if not more subtle) mind to counter them—a more “intellectual rebel,” as Pryse writes, who “no longer confronts a *tangible* bondage” (4, italics added).

Through the very magnitude of his particular portrayal of white panopticism, Ellison perhaps makes more explicit than both Wright and Petry the connection between the past—in the space of the South—and the present, in the space of the North. The sheer scope of the white panoptic power in Invisible Man is terrifying in how it refuses to limit itself to assumptions of geography, space, and urban development. The incredible reach of the North's new slavery in Ellison's novel is evidenced by the protagonist's being so strongly influenced and moved by those same panoptic forces while he is still in the South—chiefly through the college he attends and its president, Dr. Bledsoe—well before he even reaches the North. It is perhaps understandable, then, that the justified paranoia felt by Ellison's narrator achieves a conspiratorial pitch much more elaborate and intense than what is experienced by either Bigger Thomas or Lutie Johnson. Such depths of conspiracy call for an exceptional cleverness on the narrator's part, such as the cleverness demonstrated by Frederick Douglass in his triumph over the slave-breaker Edward Covey. And that is where his “invisibility,” which he had first lamented, comes in.

Invisible Man is the only representative work of these three authors in which Douglass—a portrait of him, anyway—makes an actual appearance and plays a pivotal role. Brother Tarp hangs the portrait on a wall in front of Ellison's “invisible man,” saying, “You just take a look at him once in a while [and after the “invisible man” thanks him] Don't thank me, son [...] He belongs to all of us” (378). And the broken chain link that Brother Tarp gives to him as a gift further solidifies the connection by drawing a clear parallel between Brother Tarp and Sandy

Jenkins, who gives Douglass the supposedly magical root that allows him to stand up to Edward Covey and beat him, thus reclaiming his manhood, by using Covey's own reputation as a slave-breaker against him. Ellison's protagonist has only a vague awareness of the chain link's importance, with Brother Tarp's seniority making him feel "joined [...] with his ancestors" (389); and Brother Tarp himself seems only half-conscious of the significance in this gift-giving, which further adds to its uncanniness: "but I think it's [the chain link] got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what you're fighting against [...] I guess it's kind of a good luck piece" (388). Whether Brother Tarp realizes it or not, he is the new Sandy Jenkins, a Sandy Jenkins for the new slavery of the twentieth century. Brother Tarp's own story attests to how the Emancipation Proclamation failed to magically and instantly fix everything for African-Americans—how a black man from the South could be unjustly imprisoned and put on a chain gang just for telling a white man no, losing his wife, children, and land in the process (387). After finally breaking the chain (the source of the link he gives as a gift) and escaping to the North, and having lived there for nineteen years, six months, and two days, what he tells Ellison's protagonist says it all: "I've been looking for freedom ever since, son" (388). That chain link, then, is the magical root for the twentieth century's new slave narrative, as provided by Ellison in his solidifying of the twentieth-century African-American migration narrative's potential to be that new narrative. What defines that potential is the return and renewal of a *successful* strategy against the forces of white oppression, the twentieth-century version of what Douglass had achieved against Covey with the help of the root.

Ellison makes the need for tricksterism in his protagonist more urgent, given the reach and scope of white panopticism in his novel. Housing discrimination, which served as the chief means of corralling black people for surveillance and positioning them towards crime in both

Native Son and The Street, is certainly present in Invisible Man (particularly with the eviction of the elderly black couple from the South and the angry mob that it inspires), but not nearly to the same degree. It seems, in fact, to fall into the background of the text. The chief source of white panopticism in Invisible Man is the Brotherhood, headed by Brother Jack—a source that at first seems to sympathize with the black community for its housing discrimination-based grievances. The impassioned speech that the narrator gives in reaction to the old couple’s eviction is, after all, what attracts the Brotherhood to him in the first place. However, the Brotherhood’s true intentions prove to have little to nothing to do with urban black plight and more to do with exploiting the aggrieved black populace for its own Communist agenda, made painfully obvious to the narrator when he realizes that the Brotherhood has ceased its activity in Harlem (427). Brother Jack indeed comes to actually resemble an overseer in the way he works to remove race as a concern from the narrator’s consciousness; and there is also the disciplinary, even oppressive tone of Brother Jack’s commandments, such as “You’ll learn and you’ll surrender” (465). And the narrator’s full realization of Brother Jack and the Brotherhood’s malevolence leads to his understanding of the connection between his troubles in the South and his troubles in the North:

It was a joke, an absurd joke. And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except now I recognized my invisibility. (508)

Within his own particular migration experience, Ellison's narrator realizes not only that the North is no better than the South, but that the representatives of white panoptic force on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line are apparently in cahoots against him. This is best illustrated by the connection that Dr. Bledsoe has in the North through Mr. Emerson, to whom Bledsoe sends the narrator. Before this, the narrator is expelled and relocated from the black college in the South for inadvertently showing the condescending white patron Mr. Norton sides of the local black community that the politicking black college president Mr. Bledsoe did not want seen—as Bledsoe writes in his confidential letter to Emerson, the narrator is a “delicate” instance who “threatens to upset certain delicate relationships between certain interested individuals and the school” (191). Essentially left hung out to dry, the narrator thus finds himself in a vulnerable enough position, far away from home, to be targeted for recruitment and exploitation by Jack and the Brotherhood. Towards the end of the text, shortly after he has fallen through the manhole, the narrator finally concludes that North and South both have had a hand in positioning and isolating him: “*and I lay the prisoner of a group consisting of Jack and old Emerson and Bledsoe and Norton and Ras and the school superintendent and a number of others whom I failed to recognize, but all of whom had run me*” (569). Both sides seem to have worked together, as the engraved document shown to him by his dead grandfather in a dream, to “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (33).

Through this realization of the scope and reach of what is working against him, Ellison's protagonist, again, recognizes his “invisibility.” However, he comes to see this invisibility as an advantage. As Marjorie Pryse writes, Ellison's narrator “affirms invisibility because he has transformed it, underground, and by his art, from a symptom of personal disorder to a symbol of social rebellion; it becomes his *modus vivendi*, where the self may correspond to no definition of

identity but its own” (12). “Invisibility,” as defined through the panoptic gaze of his white oppressors, entails a denial of humanity and individuality through an essentializing and opportunistic exploitation based on race; “invisibility” means an erasure of personhood, being seen as a means and tool rather than a human being. The narrator’s strategic reappropriation of invisibility comes closer to the word’s true meaning, for it allows him to quite literally *hide*, to drop off the map of white panopticism, thus working directly against panopticism’s operating “by means of general *visibility*” (Foucault 171, italics added). Invisibility, for the narrator, is then a strategy against the enforced visibility of white panopticism; and the useful reappropriation of the concept of invisibility is proof of Lacan’s conclusion that traumatic repetition is not necessarily a sign of uncomplicated victimhood, but a “resistance of the subject” through “repetition in act” (51).

In light of this strategy on the part of the protagonist, what Ellison’s narrative accomplishes is not only a revelation of the magnitude of white panoptic surveillance but the *effect* of the New Overseer’s panoptic gaze upon the perception of its black subjects—not only the way they perceive their new urban surroundings but their self-perception as well. Through the often extremely surreal depiction of the absurd and nightmarish situations in which his black migrant narrator finds himself, Ellison demonstrates how the New Overseer’s white panoptic gaze actually *distorts* perception, even distorting reality.

I. *The Distorting Gaze*

According to Marjorie Pryse, Ellison’s style is “the amalgamation of naturalism, expressionism, and *surrealism*, or magical realism” (62, italics added); surrealism in particular seems to be Ellison’s stylistic preference *over* naturalism. With Invisible Man, Ellison

stylistically reveals how the white panoptic gaze ultimately *distorts* perceived reality with full-blown, nightmarish surrealism to communicate his protagonist's disillusionment with hallucinatory intensity. This surreal style evokes a sort of acclimation sickness of the senses, which Ellison has his narrator define later in the novel; speaking of African-Americans like himself who have migrated to the northern cities from the South as "us transitory ones [...] who shoot up from the South into the busy city like wild jacks-in-the-box broken loose from our springs—so sudden that our gait becomes like that of deep-sea divers suffering from the bends" (439-440). Indeed, Thomas Heise describes the jarring shift of scene for a black migrant from the agrarian to an industrial environment as something of a time rush that affords little to no time for adjustment (140). Furthermore, what he describes as "the more insidious and often invisible machinations of northern racism" (139) compound the acclimation sickness with further concentrating pressures metaphorically indicative of urban segregation; this segregation, he says, "condenses the geographical expression of class difference" (136), creating the "pressurized terrain of the ghetto" (139). Ellison's connecting of the oppressive panoptic forces in the North with those forces in the South—which, in fact, prove to be emissaries of the northern forces—further allows for the possibility that this "sickness" of disorientation is a symptom of the New Overseer's reality-distorting gaze, and that it is the white panoptic gaze itself that further induces the migrant's disorientation by shuttling him so rapidly from South to North, as the recruited force of Dr. Bledsoe does, delivering the narrator into the hands of Mr. Emerson and then Brother Jack.

Two key metaphors in Invisible Man for the distorting influence of this white panoptic gaze are Brother Jack's glass eye, which, as an eye that cannot actually *see*, becomes proof to the narrator of his "invisibility" (his ignored humanity and individuality) under that gaze; and the

Liberty Paints factory where the narrator briefly works upon his arrival in the North. The company's slogan, visible on a huge electric sign, "KEEP AMERICA PURE / WITH / LIBERTY PAINTS" (196), screams white supremacy, as does the slogan for one particular color of paint—"If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" (217). The punchline, of course, is that the secret ingredient to this Optic White is ten drops of a "dead black" liquid that must be thoroughly stirred into it the white base (200), a rather tragicomic metaphor for African-Americans' historically hidden, forced and thankless contribution to the economic and structural development of America through slavery and other forms of economic exploitation. That Liberty Paints has hired African-Americans as scabs to replace fired white workers, and the old black factory worker Lucius Brockway's conclusion that "*we the machines inside the machine*"(219), lends further credence to this historically symbolic irony. This stunning contradiction in terms—African-Americans' contribution to the fabric of American society and their simultaneously being denied a place within or identification with that society—is the basis for the dominant white culture's distorting panopticism.

The boiler explosion, with its "bath of whiteness" resulting in the narrator's sense of "black emptiness" (229-230), provides for the surrealistic climax to this episode with further symbolism for the narrator's negative "invisibility" within the standards of the dominant culture. And the particularly strange scene that follows the boiler explosion, of white company scientists hooking the narrator to some sort of shock therapy machine, confirms the dominant culture's agenda to deny the black subject of any sense of individual grievance that could lead to protest and revolt; the "machine," without the "negative effects of the knife," produces the "results of a prefrontal lobotomy," leading the subject to "experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better, society will suffer no traumata on his account" (236). By "society," the white

scientist obviously means the dominant culture's system of norms and its wish to not have any disgruntled individuals undermine those norms. Such preventive "therapy" on the part of the white hegemony and its panoptic forces confesses that hegemony's fear of internal disturbances created by those who are marginalized by its power; and it further confesses an awareness of the subjugated black populace as the dominant culture's own "dark unconscious" (139), as Thomas Heise describes.⁶¹ But the anger and dissatisfaction which the white scientists treat as symptoms of a psychological disorder are in fact the appropriate responses to the social forces of racial inequality in the urban environment. The trick is that the scientists' "cure" is actually the *cause* of the disease, and the disorientation experienced by Ellison's invisible man—the "amnesia, mental fragmentation, and the release of repressed desires" (Heise 144)—becomes a representative for perhaps every individual member of the subjugated black populace. The "cure" may relieve the anger and dissatisfaction, but it does so through distorting the subject's perception, not by sharpening it. The object is to numb and to cloud, to the point of warping. Wright's Fred Daniels, of course, counters the example of Ellison's protagonist as an example as perhaps a more successfully brainwashed subject—his obviously misguided and indoctrinated sense of guilt ultimately leading him to resurface from his underground sanctuary and run back (lethally) into the arms of the policemen from whom he had escaped and who have been pursuing him. He apparently lacks the ingenuity which makes Ellison's protagonist more capable of using the "invisibility" assigned to him as an advantage, succumbing easily and quickly to the pressures of lonely isolation and the seeming impossibility of individual self-realization and self-making.

⁶¹Heise draws this metaphor from the ironically underground location of the LaFargue Psychiatric Clinic, the first clinic of its kind in Harlem.

Such internalization of the dominant culture's norms and panoptic maneuverings is evident in Invisible Man well before the narrator sets foot in the North. It is demonstrated to a great degree by the narrator himself and his fellow students while attending the black college in the South. The college's anti-individualism proves to be just another form of social engineering, similar to and even anticipating the norm-enforcing surveillance that the narrator will experience up north; it proves, in fact, to be an *extension* of those white panoptic forces in the North the more the connection between Dr. Bledsoe and powerful northern white people such as Mr. Norton and Mr. Emerson is made clear. Sure, one does not get the sense that Dr. Bledsoe has any love lost for such rich white patrons and colleagues, but the security he has found and established for himself by showing those white patrons what they want to see—"playing their game," so to speak—is such that he will fiercely protect it, sacrificing such individuals as the narrator who demonstrate a core averseness to that game. The students are thus conditioned to have the same standards as the school officials, whose standards are in fact those of the rich white people from the North to whom they must cater for patronage (with the officials' internalization of those standards obviously being much less naïve). It is the students then, of whom the narrator is one, who are the most-affected victims of the New Overseer's distortion of perception.

Officials and students thus both come to be embarrassed by the likes of the sharecropper Jim Trueblood, who had impregnated his own bed-sharing daughter during a lucid dream (49) and thus brought disgrace upon the local black community. The narrator himself, who is driving the visiting Mr. Norton around, is ashamed of the Black Belt "peasants" with whom Mr. Norton is strangely fascinated; and he resents those "like Trueblood, [who] did everything it seemed to pull [those affiliated with the school] down" when the students and school officials felt that they

were “trying to lift them up” (47).⁶² What the narrator does not seem to fully appreciate is how Mr. Norton is apparently not the only white person interested in Jim Trueblood; it is the local white officials who actually protect Trueblood from the disapproval and wrath of those affiliated with the college. Trueblood is, of course, oblivious to how the sympathy and support given to him by local white officials is a kind a recruitment; they are using him as a means to limit and contain the black college’s power, waving him as an embarrassing and grotesque stereotype in the college’s face. The white officials like Trueblood not only for his usefulness in shaming the college (even regularly giving him food, water and work) but for what they see as his thorough fulfillment of all of their racist expectations and beliefs concerning African-Americans. Similar to their northern counterparts, these southern white officials are working to reductively distort the collective self-image of the local black population, especially those with aspirations of social mobility, to ensure the standards of white supremacy.

If there is one space in Invisible Man where Ellison concentrates his surrealism toward the depiction white panopticism’s distorting effects upon the psychological well-being of its black subjects, it is the bar and brothel known as the Golden Day. It is especially significant for its depiction of those effects upon black subjects in the South—either before they even experience the disillusionment of northern migration or after they have decided to return to the South out of homesickness and lack of better options. Both instances provide the narrator with a warning of his possible future should he continue along his path of naively conforming to and following the standards of the dominant culture. The defining absurdity of the Golden Day scene is how a large group of insane black veterans keep a regular appointment at the bar and brothel as a kind of field trip—“therapy,” as one vet (or “patient”) calls it (81). This insanity manifests

⁶²The same goes for the Golden Day, the local bar and brothel that, according to the bartender Big Halley, the school has been trying to close (75).

itself in ways such as one veteran acting as the leader of the march toward the Golden Day and banging on the hood of the narrator's car with his cane, only to be instantly checked by the narrator's lie that Mr. Norton (in the back seat) is his war-time Commander-in-Chief (72); another vet thinking that Mr. Norton is his grandfather, Thomas Jefferson (78); and another vet thinking that John D. Rockefeller stole the formula for changing blood into money from him (81). But it quickly becomes evident that the insanity of these veterans is the result of traumatically frustrating and disappointing experiences borne of the dominant culture's panoptic racism. These are men who, it must be remembered, did everything right—not just as veterans who served their country only to be denied the equality that country is supposed to promise, but, as the narrator points out: “Many of them had been doctors, lawyers, teachers, Civil Service workers; there were several cooks, a preacher, a politician, and an artist. One very nutty one had been a psychiatrist” (74). The explanation of one vet to Mr. Norton of how he used to be a doctor is particularly telling; referring to the “semi-madhouse” (the Golden Day, the black veteran community, the South in general), he says, “I escaped for a while—I went to France with the Army Medical Corps and remained there after the Armistice to study and practice” (90).

Also surreal, even cartoonish, is the attendant that is sent along to chaperone the veterans, “a kind of censor, to see,” absurdly, “that the therapy fails” (81). By ensuring that the therapy perpetually fails, it is clear that the aim of the local dominant white power structure is not to cure, but to manage, to keep in place, just another kind of ghettoization. This attendant is the “giant” Supercargo, who is usually dressed in a “hard-starched white uniform” (82). His giant blackness enveloped in such stiff whiteness makes him an absurd caricature of the black brute doing the bidding of some distant white master; his concern for the dominant white initiative is made clear through his yelling from upstairs, “I want order down there, [...] and if there's white

folks down there, I wan's *double order*" (82). As perhaps a more crude and less sophisticated version of Dr. Bledsoe, Supercargo also represents the recruited black arm of the New Overseer's white panoptic force; and he too becomes a part of the paranoia inspired by the New Overseer's apparent omnipresence, as one vet named Sylvester explains—"Sometimes I get so afraid of him I feel that he's inside my head" (84). The Golden Day itself is then a white panoptic tool, a way of keeping the aspirations of those affiliated with the college in line through the shame of the bar and brothel's enduring presence; though the school had tried to make the Golden Day "respectable," the local white power structure "had a hand in it somehow and they got nowhere" (73).

That the Golden Day is a white panoptic tool is further affirmed by the significance of Mr. Norton's almost fateful presence there. To the frightened narrator, the face of Mr. Norton, who is passed out under the stairs, is "like a formless white death, suddenly appeared before me, a death which had been there all the time and which had now revealed itself in the madness of the Golden Day" (86). Furthermore, as the former doctor tells Mr. Norton, "To some, you are the great white father, to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come even into the Golden Day" (93). The irony of Mr. Norton's unwitting arrival in the midst of the bedlam within the Golden Day is that he, through his financial patronage of the college, contributes to the great white panoptic scheme of which both the school and the bar are a part. Seemingly unconscious of his own part in the scheme, Mr. Norton has to have his panoptic status bitterly pointed out to him by this former doctor—that he, "for all [his] power," is "not a man [...] but a God, a force" (95).⁶³ This, tellingly, is what upsets Norton into finally leaving the Golden Day—not the insanity, drunkenness, prostitution, or violence!—as the narrator

⁶³Mr. Norton's obliviousness to his own white panoptic significance is perhaps best explained by Richard Dyer: "White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people [...]. Most of this is not

confusedly ponders while driving Norton back to the school: “In the Golden Day he had seemed more curious than anything else—until the vet had started talking wild” (98). Given his guilty patronage of the college, which comes out of a vague and self-righteous feeling that African-Americans are closely connected with his “destiny” (41), Norton seems to affirm Sartre’s conclusion that some colonialists “reject their objective reality” and “do every day in reality what they condemn in fantasy,” succeeding only in finding “moral comfort in malaise” (xxv-xxvi). Even in his apparent lack of awareness of his own place within the panoptic scheme, it is clear that Norton, from the dominant white perspective, is a hypocrite and has no moral qualms with the decadence within the Golden Day. The alcohol and sex it offers are in fact key components of the white panoptic apparatus for controlling the black community, both through the public-image shaming of those affiliated with the school and the rebellion-quelling intoxicants offered as “therapy” to those driven crazy by the dominant culture’s false promises.

The insanity of the veterans and the surreal fiascos typical within the Golden Day serve as a prophetic caution to Ellison’s protagonist. At this point, he has only a vague awareness of this caution, a feeling of discomfort upon realizing that the vets “were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times [he] vaguely aspired” (74). The former doctor in particular serves as a kind of ghost from the future, having himself been a student at the college and now wishing that someone had warned him back then so that he “wouldn’t be the casualty that [he is]” (91). Even after returning to the South out of nostalgia, he came to realize “that my work could bring me no dignity,” having been beaten and run out of town in the middle of the night by a white mob for simply saving a man’s life with his medical knowledge (92).

Though he has no solution, only bitterness, for his victimhood at the hands of white panopticism,

done deliberately and maliciously [...] goodwill is not unheard of in white people’s engagement with others. White power none the less reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal” (9-10).

this former doctor does provide the narrator with an important warning against that panopticism's methods of indoctrination and internalization. Talking about the narrator (with the narrator right in front of him) to Mr. Norton, the vet says, "Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's *invisible*, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (94, italics added). Aside from the opening lines of the Prologue, which obviously narrates from the future, long after the events of the Golden Day, this is the first mention of invisibility in the narrator's story of how he got to his underground space. This is perhaps where the seed is first unconsciously planted for what Ellison's invisible man must reappropriate in order to survive and thwart the effects of white panopticism, thus anticipating a similar scene of bedlam on a much larger scale to come later in the invisible man's journey north—the riot in Harlem, which will be discussed further along in the chapter.

The beginnings of clarity seem to come for Ellison's narrator during Dr. Bledsoe's furious interrogation of him for allowing Mr. Norton to see the Black Belt "peasants"; in response to Dr. Bledsoe's saying, "Nigger, this isn't the time to lie. I'm no white man," the narrator feels "as though he'd struck me [...] He called me *that*...[...] *He called me that*" (139). This is the man who, to the narrator, was "the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but *two* Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and *creamy-complexioned* wife" (101, italics added). The final detail of the "creamy-complexioned" wife makes it especially clear that Bledsoe's standards of personal success are *white* ones, not only internalized by him but passed down as objects of aspiration for the students he indoctrinates and influences. Furthermore, the zeal with which Bledsoe "plays the game" has led

to an internalization on his part so deep as to create an effect of racial *doubling*. This seems to be confirmed not only by his use of the racist epithet towards the narrator, but in how he resembles the New Overseer in his panoptic maneuvering against the old vet at the Golden Day, hinting at having him investigated (140) before apparently having him shipped off on a bus the next day (152). The tragedy of Bledsoe is how, in what he sees as his practical acceptance of dominant white standards and having to “act the nigger” (143) to achieve his success, he has essentially become what he hates—through internalization and recruitment, just another arm of white panoptic force. His admission to the narrator that “I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am” (143) reveals this in an especially chilling way, even harkening back to the less insidious methods of certain white people in the post-bellum South, and further revealing how his brutal administrative machinations have nothing to do with black social uplift and everything to do with his own selfish aims. The doubling effect that defines the extreme example of Dr. Bledsoe is prime testimony to the distortion produced by the standards imposed by the white panoptic gaze; it is a distortion that warps even one’s own sense of racial identity and individuality, and we get the sense that, in his moment of shock at Bledsoe’s calling him “nigger,” the narrator has unconsciously begun to dodge the bullet of white indoctrination through Bledsoe.

Ellison’s surrealism is appropriate in communicating the distorted world in which the narrator finds himself, with even the likes of the Brotherhood (both its white and its black members, under Brother Jack), who claim to be working *against* the white status quo, actually sharing in its panoptic functions against African-Americans. Furthermore, the way in which this world betrays all hopeful migrant expectations—offering not only no relief from the racism experienced in the South, but not even the directness and honesty of that southern racism—draws

an unexpected connection between the white panoptic strategies in both the North and the South. As Ellison writes in his “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” essay:

Down at the deep dark bottom of the melting pot, where the private is public and the public private, where black is white and white black, where the immoral becomes moral and the moral is anything that makes one feel good (or that one has the power to sustain), the white man’s relish is apt to be the black man’s gall.
(104)

Northern white panopticism, for the purposes of maintaining its own power, produces contradictions and inversions that sicken the black migrant’s perception—of his surroundings, of himself, of his ambitions, of his hopes—through the confusing disillusionment of the new northern slavery. Not only does this new slavery’s initiating system of housing discrimination and surveillance-segregation undermine the fundamental assumptions of public versus private, but this is a slavery in which the New Overseer has blurred his own identity through the recruitment of a seeming myriad of lesser overseers who double him in spite of their own race, politics, or personal agendas (especially blurring the lines between black and white as demonstrated by the recruited forces of Bledsoe and the black members of the Brotherhood). Not knowing who to trust—even himself, given his increasing awareness of his own cultural indoctrination—the shocked migrant is no longer certain of the difference between moral and immoral as defined by white “rightness,” a standard which obviously does not keep the African-American in mind as a priority. Now aware of his own indoctrinated, distorted ideology, Ellison’s protagonist realizes that the supposed “reality” has been taught to accept is not reality at all, but the warped interpretation of reality prescribed and projected by the New Overseer’s white panoptic gaze.

However, all is not bleak in this invisible man's realization. Hardly. For within the distortion he recognizes the "beautiful absurdity of [his] American identity," an identity that "the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons" refuse to see from within the "confusion" and "impatience" (559) of their narrow agendas and the panoptic projections of those agendas. Even in the hectic and desperate negotiation of his heavily conspiratorial environment, the invisible man recognizes "the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running" (559). This, of course, sets him up perfectly for the disguised blessing of falling through the manhole and finding himself underground, for it is in this underground space where he will further refine his own sense of identity and individuality beyond the warping expectations and standards created by the reality-distorting effects of white panopticism.

II. *The Cure Underground*

One cannot help but notice the similarities between the underground space described in the Epilogue and Prologue of *Invisible Man* and the sewer into which Fred Daniels finds temporary refuge in Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground." Both Daniels and Ellison's narrator find themselves in a space that is away from the oppressive white world above them—that "wild forest filled with death" aboveground, as Daniels describes it (1433). However, Daniels' underworld proves to be just that—a hell, in which the sense of squalor and inferiority instilled upon him by the white world prove to be so internalized that he finally and desperately resurfaces. Through his "invisible" narrator, seizes a chance at realizing the underground's potential as a space of counter-strategy against white panopticism; his more obvious realization and utilizing of the underground's potential for protest is proof of a tricksterism that brings him

closer to the Douglass victory over Edward Covey. As an example of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes as the Signifying Monkey, Ellison, as an African-American writer, employs a “double-voicedness,” or a repetition “with a signal difference” (51), not only in terms of his white influences (especially with naturalism) but with the influence of Wright and even Douglass as well.⁶⁴

As opposed to Wright, the underground space represents for Ellison a means of evading the white panoptic gaze. The uncovered manhole into which Ellison’s protagonist falls then acts as a kind of wormhole to a space that lies off of the panoptic map. Given that Brother Tarp’s chain link is one of the defensive weapons used by the protagonist to make his way through the perilous and apocalyptic landscape of the riot—and how, as previously mentioned, this chain link is the new magic root given to Douglass by Sandy—one is reminded of Paul Gilroy’s punning of “rooted” and “routed” (3); Ellison’s narrator finds the individualism self-realization achieved by Douglass via Sandy’s *root* through the alternative *route* of the underground space.

Wright’s underground, best portrayed in “The Man Who Lived Underground,” more typically fits the formula for Heise’s African-American “narratives of descent,” with the ghetto acting as America’s toilet and blackness as its waste (129).⁶⁵ The virtually constant rain in Wright’s short story (rather than the intensely present snow in Native Son) indeed gives the sense that Fred Daniels has actually been flushed from the world above to the other below. In this sense, the underground for Wright is not a space for evading white panoptic power, but a space included within the mechanism of that very power.⁶⁶ It becomes a metaphorical

⁶⁴As Gates elaborates, “Black texts Signify upon other black texts” (xxvii).

⁶⁵Notice Memmi’s choice of words in describing the colonizer’s need to degrade the colonized: “His disquiet and resulting thirst for justification require the usurper to extol himself to the skies and *to drive the usurped below the ground* at the same time” (53, italics added).

⁶⁶However, it should not be ignored, as Michel Fabre points out, that “The Man Who Lived Underground” is “a parable of black life in American” that anticipates Ellison’s “invisibility” (102).

intensification of what the ghetto already is, a space for quarantining African-Americans who have become objects of the dominant white culture's "social anxieties about civic disorder, disease, and madness" (Heise 141-142)—especially the rioting "kind," how the police officers who finally shoot and kill Fred see him (Heise 142). As a metaphorical space, the sewer in "The Man Who Lived Underground" "materializ[es] the ideology of racial abjection" (Heise 148) of an entire demographic under the "duress of institutional racism and violently enforced spatial isolation" (Heise 146). Furthermore, Fred's inability to reappropriate the underground space in which he finds himself proves how the sewer as an underground space, according to Heise, "does not liberate [the] mind [but] rots it" (144); it reflects not only a lack of cleverness on Fred's part, but the depths of internalization that white panoptic power is capable of inspiring in its black subjects. His attempt to overcome the norms and standards of the dominating white world above by papering the walls around him with money proves an especially telling failure; amused at this money wallpaper, he does a little wishful thinking: "He had triumphed over the world aboveground! He was free! If only people could see this! He wanted to run from this cave and yell his discovery to the world" (1433). However, in very little time, his underground room becomes terrible to him: "The spell was broken. He shuddered, feeling that, in spite of his fear, sooner or later he would go up into that dead sunshine and somehow say something to somebody about all this" (1435). Indeed, his prior wish that someone aboveground could see his wallpaper reveals a begrudging adherence to dominant white opinion and a nagging desire to please it,⁶⁷ or at least impress it; in short, he still cares what the dominant culture thinks of him. Fred's ultimate decision to resurface and turn himself in reveals the depths of his internalization of dominant

⁶⁷As Memmi writes: "The colonized does not seek merely to enrich himself with the colonizer's virtues. In the name of what he hopes to become, he sets his mind on impoverishing himself, tearing himself away from his true self" (121). Daniels' case is also an unfortunate example of failed revolt on the part of the colonized subject, who, at the height of his revolt, "still bears the traces and lessons of prolonged cohabitation [with the colonizer]" and "fights in the name of the very values of the colonizer" (129).

white standards. The sewer was not a sanctuary but just another zone for the New Overseer's pressurizing forces of concentration; though seemingly *apart* from the white world above, it is in fact *a part* of it—its filthy and cramped environment proving metaphorically contagious to the black subject, who internalizes the sense of uncleanness and worthlessness that the dominant culture assigns to him.

Fred does get a vague sense of the guilt-trauma that the urban North's environmental racism imposes on him:

Why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical? It seemed that when one felt this guilt one was retracing in one's feelings a faint pattern designed long before; it seemed that one was always trying to remember a gigantic shock that had left a haunting impression upon one's body which one could not forget or shake off, but which had been forgotten by the conscious mind, creating in one's life a state of eternal anxiety.
(1436)

The language of trauma used by Wright in this passage hints at an awareness of the connection between the old slavery of the South and the new slavery of the North, not to mention once again communicating the disillusionment felt by southern black migrants who found themselves fleeing from one form of slavery and into the waiting arms of another. This perhaps makes Wright's decision to not overcome the underground space in his fiction even more surprising; whether through oversight on his part or a more deliberate decision borne of pessimism, Wright seems to have either forgotten or ignored both the physical and the symbolic importance of the underground space in the history of successful African-American protest even in the days before emancipation. Ellison, again, perhaps represents a more successful rediscovery of this important

symbolism, reappropriating and reutilizing the underground space as a zone of evasion and escape.⁶⁸

Wright projects his pessimistic take on underground symbolism, with historical and traumatic imagery similar to that of the previous passage, onto hospitals as well, as shown in a particular episode of Black Boy:

The hospital kept us four Negroes, as though we were close kin to the animals we tended, huddled together down in the underworld corridors of the hospital, separated by a vast psychological distance from the significant processes of the rest of the hospital—just as America had kept us locked in the dark underworld of American life for three hundred years. (314)

Ellison also has his sentiments concerning hospitals and sanitariums. One clinic in particular is somewhat more hopeful as an example, and it provided him with the subject matter and guiding metaphor for his essay “Harlem is Nowhere”—the LaFargue Psychiatric Clinic in Harlem, “the only center in the city wherein both Negroes and whites may receive extended psychiatric care” (320). Its importance for both black and white Americans is key to its metaphorical significance, for Ellison sees it as “an underground extension of symbolically addresses the problems of American democracy on racial lines. Notice the sense of disequilibrium in Ellison’s description of entering the clinic: “One must descend to the basement and move along a confusing mazelike hall to reach it. Twice the passage seems to lead to a blank wall” (320). Such frustration speaks accurately to the American illness that the LaFargue Clinic represents for Ellison, but the clinic’s

⁶⁸As Gates seems to point out, Ellison nonetheless owes Wright for “The Man Who Lived Underground” as a text upon which to so successfully “Signify”: “If Daniels’s fate is signified by the objects over which he stumbles in the darkness of the sewer, Ellison Signifies upon Wright’s novella by repeating this underground scene of discovery but having his protagonist burn the bits of paper through which he had allowed himself to be defined by others” (106). Burn, of course, as opposed to decorating the walls with them in hopes that someone (most likely white, from the world above) will see.

location provides an important emphasis on the neurotic state of uncertainty in the African-American's sense of identity; they are beings who "in responding to the complex forces of American have become confused" (321), who are "not quite citizens and yet Americans" (322). The necessity of the LaFargue Clinic, then, is the address "the sickness of the social order" and "the sense of unreality that haunts Harlem" (327).

Ellison takes the title of "Harlem is Nowhere" from a customary phrase in Harlem: in response to "How are you?" one answers "Oh man, I'm *nowhere*" (323). This strange answer also finds its way into Invisible Man through Ras, who yells accusingly at the protagonist, "You are nowhere, mahn. Nowhere!" (375); and both instances communicate the African-American's sense of being lost in American society.⁶⁹ As Ellison elaborates, "One's identity drifts in a capricious reality in which even the most commonly held assumptions are questionable. One 'is' literally, but nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a 'displaced person' of American society" (325). This sense of being "nowhere" goes hand in hand with the "invisibility" representing, as he wrote in his working notes for Invisible Man, the "great formlessness of Negro life wherein all values are in flux" ("Working Notes" 343). For Ellison, then, the "nowhere" of the underground is a site of refuge, for it lies under the New Overseer's white panoptic radar; as opposed to Wright, and through the example of the LaFargue clinic, the underground for Ellison is not the site of waste and sickness but the *cure*.

Another, perhaps less obvious underground space provides an epiphany for the narrator, one that runs counter to his present attempts at survival through conformity to the norms of both the dominant white culture and his own self-preserving community. While in the subway, he spots three boys in zoot suits, "as though I'd never seen their like before" (440). Their stark

⁶⁹Interestingly, Petry seems to anticipate this in "In Darkness and Confusion" when William tells the crowd, "Good people of Harlem [...] We don't belong anywhere" (291).

individuality inspires the narrator on many levels—mainly, that their apparent lack of concern for appearing “normal” seems to offer a refreshing sense of freedom and confidence among them; and that they do not lament belonging altogether to one or the other world (black/white, North/South, urban/rural) but rather celebrate their transitional cultural status—speaking a “jived-up transitional language full of country glamour” and thinking “transitional thoughts” (441). These young men are unknowingly the invisible man’s salvation, for it is perhaps in their marginal tricksterism that the seed is planted within him to seek the path of individualism as a means of thwarting white panopticism. Their colorfulness, their individuality, in fact provides a counter-distortion to the New Overseer’s distorting panoptic gaze: “These fellows whose bodies seemed—what had one of my teachers said of me?—‘You’re like one of these African sculptures, *distorted* in the interest of a design.’ Well, what design and whose?” (440) The answer is one’s own, as opposed to the normative design of that the dominant culture wishes to impose upon you. The recollection of his teacher’s comment makes the connection between the narrator and the three young men clear, and thus begins the invisible man’s questioning of the Brotherhood in earnest; the three young men are, after all, “men outside of historical time [...] untouched [and] didn’t believe in Brotherhood, no doubt had never heard of it” (440). In pondering how these very boys might be “the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious” (441), the narrator entertains a trickster version of history, one counter to the more rigid and scientific version central to the Brotherhood’s ideology: “What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise!” (441) This other underground space, which prefigures the one in which the narrator finds himself at the novel’s conclusion, thus also

demonstrates an opportunity for success through reappropriation and shirking of the strategies of indoctrination and internalization which can paralyze the migrant with a false sense of fixity.

According to Ellison himself, in “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” Invisible Man runs counter to the more negative impression one gets of the underground, as utilized by Wright in “The Man Who Lived Underground”; speaking of his protagonist, says that “his movement vertically downward (not into a ‘sewer,’ Freud notwithstanding, but into a coal cellar, a source of heat, light, power and, through association with the character’s motivation, self-perception) is a process of *rising* to an understanding of his human condition” (111). The protagonist’s means to this rising toward self-realization is a stubborn, solitary individualism; and it is this extreme individualism that allows him to avoid the usual pitfalls laid by the New Overseer and his various recruits. More sober and comfortable in his solitude than any protagonist created by Wright, Ellison’s invisible man is thus less vulnerable to the New Overseer’s strategies of indoctrination and recruitment, becoming more mindful and weary of those who have been recruited as well as more mindful of and less affected by internalization of white norms.

III. *The Individual Resisting Murder*

As a zone that lies off of the New Overseer’s panoptic map, the underground space for Ellison is a reappropriated site of refuge; but one can still see a nod to both Wright’s more pessimistic view and Petry’s gothic rendering of tenement life as entombment in the invisible man’s eulogy for Tod Clifton. However, Ellison finds a way, through his narrator, toward identification with each *individual* within the black community:

Now he’s in this box with the bolts tightened down. He’s in the box *and we’re in there with him*, and when I’ve told you this you can go. It’s dark in this box and

it's crowded. It has a cracked ceiling and a clogged-up toilet in the hall. It has rats and roaches, and it's far, far too expensive a dwelling. The air is bad and it'll be cold this winter. (458, italics added)

In translating Tod Clifton's coffin into the cramped ghetto apartment space, the invisible man attempts "to remind the mourners of *their* reality," a process which ultimately permits him "to see the individuality of faces in the crowd; each individual becomes a manifestation of the dead man" (Pryse 3)—"OUR HOPE SHOT DOWN," as the black-boarded signs at Clifton's funeral read (450). Through his narrator, Ellison seizes an opportunity that Wright apparently had missed—to relate the all-too-typical experiences of mid-twentieth-century African-Americans at the hands of housing discrimination and urban segregation *on an individual level*. This eulogy scene thus anticipates the narrator's artful reutilization of the underground space in which he finds himself for more potentially beneficial purposes; and the means to such a reappropriation of a space treated more pessimistically by both Wright and Petry is the invisible man's rediscovery and reaffirmation of his own individuality (not beyond race but within it). And the way toward that individual self-realization is yet another reappropriation—of the notion of "invisibility," which the narrator explains on the novel's first page: "I am an invisible man [...] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me [...] When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (3). From this refusal of those who look upon him to see beyond their own stereotyping expectations and monolithic assumptions the narrator draws the advantage of literal hiddenness, turning white panopticism's enforcing of visibility through surveillance on its head. In its attempts to make the black population more visible through concentration into ghettos, white panopticism does not foresee the potential for backfire within its own

homogenizing assumptions—assumptions that seem to dismiss, at white panopticism’s peril, individual ingenuity—concerning a particular demographic.

As residual evidence of Wright’s treatment of the underground space presents itself in Invisible Man before Ellison reappropriates it, the same can be said for “invisibility.” The ambiguous anonymity—or invisibility—that the city affords is certainly not lost on Wright either. He describes in Black Boy how he was passed by a white man soon after his arrival in Chicago: “I did not exist for him; I was as far from his mind as the stone buildings that swept past in the street. It would have been illegal for me to sit beside him in the part of the South that I had come from” (262). The anonymity afforded by the metropolis initially seems to transcend racial difference, with each person seeming “to regard the other as a part of the city landscape” (262). Ellison too conveys this vague and ultimately misleading sense of hope in Invisible Man through the protagonist upon his first arriving in Harlem: “a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds” (159); and like the anonymous white man taking no notice of Wright, the urban crowd nonchalantly passes Ras while he stands on a ladder and tries to incite black anger. But fear and dread are not absent in the black migrant’s experience either—Wright ponders: “Should I have come here? But going back was impossible. I had fled a known terror, and perhaps I could cope with this unknown terror that lay ahead” (Black Boy 262); and Ellison’s invisible man has a vague sense of “playing a part in some scheme” before dismissing his suspicions as “all fantastic” (170). Also, the sense of identity erasure, or at least the threat of identity erasure, is ever-present in the yam he tries to eat, bought from a street vendor trying to capitalize on his Southern past. The fact that it is frost-bitten is symbolic enough to give him pause: “What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What

a waste, what a senseless waste!” (266) Both authors thus demonstrate an understanding of what Kenneth W. Warren describes as the “powerful organizing force” that coincides with the “emergence of the metropolis,” with the cityscape ultimately acting as a “psychic map” for “renegotiating personal and group identity” (398). Such a reworking of one’s identity upon meeting the new urban environment—especially if one is coming from a narrow-minded and small rural town, and one is feeling the detrimental effects of such a town’s discriminations—would certainly be liberating for some. However, with this apparent fresh start often comes the removal of one’s old comforts and support systems. For a black migrant, such removals often result in exposure to new means of the same old discriminations—namely, of white panopticism’s strategy of rendering black migrants “invisible” through the homogenizing effects of ghettoization and capitalizing upon the black migrant community’s self-defensive tendency towards anti-individualism. All of this is to ensure a group vulnerability with minimal individual variations to maintain the dominant white power structure.

What Ellison seems to be more consciously hitting upon is the New Overseer’s use of anti-individualism as a panoptic strategy. Again, this applies not only to the literal North but the North’s apparent panoptic reach into even the South, especially through the institution of the black college which the invisible man attends. Thinking of the “faded and yellowed” pictures of the school’s early days displayed in the library while driving Mr. Norton around, he remembers the “photographs of men and women in wagons drawn by mule teams and oxen, dressed in black, dusty clothing, *people who seemed almost without individuality*, a black mob that seemed to be waiting, looking with blank faces” (39, italics added). These photographs represent the school’s historical ties to not only the hardship of pre-emancipation days but the continuing discrimination throughout the Reconstruction, with the school’s current students being the

inheritors of the resulting disappointment and disillusionment even into the twentieth century. A big part of that disillusionment is the assigning of the African-American individual to being a mere part of a purely historical “black mob.” As a part of the institution of the school, under the ever-watchful panoptic eye of the recruited Dr. Bledsoe, the narrator is under constant pressure to not only avoid embarrassing the community and institution to which he belong, but to not betray or disappoint the assumptions and expectations of northern white patrons like Mr. Norton. As Ellison writes in “An Extravagance of Laughter”:

I, who was an unwilling and not always conscious embodiment of that historical complexity, and a symbol of the Civil War’s sacrificial bloodshed [...] Thus in my dark singularity I often appeared to be perceived more as a symbol than as an individual, more as a threatening sign [...] than as a disinterested seeker after culture. (624)

Made into more of a representative than an individual human being, the narrator feels like one of the figures in the photographs who “had never seemed actually to have been alive, but were more like signs or symbols one found on the last pages of the dictionary” (39), consigned solely to the group-burden of historical significance without any individual humanity in the here and now, and certainly no individual hopes for the future. Through the historical window provided by these photographs, the narrator thus gets an intimation of how, according to Derrick A. Bell, “the degree of progress blacks have made away from slavery and toward equality” had depended on “whether allowing blacks more or less opportunity best served the interests and aims of white society” (39); and that racial integration is only even partially embraced when it can occur “on a basis that insures white dominance and control” (43). Racial integration, the new “freedom,” is

then merely a newer and more subtle form of slavery, a mere token “freedom” of convenience for the dominant culture.

White panoptic maneuverings against black individuality, of course, continue in the North through the Brotherhood. And once again, Ellison’s migrant protagonist is saddled with the identity-narrowing burden of history, but from another trajectory—in fact, the opposite trajectory. Whereas the communal and institutional pressures acting upon the narrator’s individuality in the South work to erase his identity through an arguably excessive focus on race, Brother Jack expresses a fundamental impatience with focusing on race at all; he snaps at the narrator, “Why do you fellows always talk in terms of race!” (292), and later coldly belittles the narrator’s sense of “personal responsibility” for the deceased Tod Clifton (463). However, the panoptic pressures exerted through the white Brother Jack and the black Dr. Bledsoe share the common aim of identity erasure for an elusive and intangible “common” or “greater good.” As Brother Jack explains to the narrator, “But you mustn’t waste your emotions on individuals, they don’t count [...] Those old ones [...] It’s sad, yes. But they’re already dead, defunct. History has passed them by. Unfortunate, but there’s nothing to do about them [...] *History* has been born in your brain” (291). And the narrator does seem to at least initially, and superficially, buy into this, explaining at one point how he is merely “a cog in a machine” and that “We here in the Brotherhood work as a unit” (396-397).

However, the Brotherhood and Brother Jack’s lack of concern (rather, use) for race is not rooted in naïve liberal optimism, and their motivations toward a “greater good” is no equally shared sacrifice. Their neglect and seeming ignorance of the racial component is, in fact, a convenient means of perpetuating the sufferings that are a result of racial difference. As Cheryl Harris points out, “The law’s approach to group identity reproduces subordination, in the past

through ‘race-ing’ a group—that is, by assigning a racial identity that equated with inferior status, and in the present by erasing racial group identity” (53). The Brotherhood is then assuming a pseudo-objective pose, with their embracing of the “norm of colorblindness” actually helping to achieve the “protection of the property interest in whiteness” (60). Similarly, Ian Haney Lopez explains the “perversity of color-blindness”—how “to banish race-words redoubles the hegemony of race by targeting efforts to combat racism while leaving race and its effects unchallenged and embedded in society, seemingly natural rather than the product of social choices” (177). Race-blindness, then, ironically does not target the harmful effects of racism, but the very efforts to do something against such harms through willful and convenient ignorance and neglect. Ellison’s narrator gets an early sense of these sinister contradictions within Brother Jack—of Jack’s supposedly being an agent working *against* social oppression while also expressing a desire to control and manipulate the masses: “Say what the people want to hear, but say it in such a way that they’ll do what we wish” (359). Brother Jack’s cynical, dehumanizing and de-individualizing use of African-American recruits such as the narrator and Tod Clifton reveal him to be just another kind of overseer; take, for instance, how he finds the narrator’s speeches too “wild,” that he needs “training,” to be “tamed” (351).

This resemblance of Brother Jack to the pre-Emancipation overseer is certainly not lost on the narrator, who flat-out confronts Brother Jack with this realization, calling him the “great white father” and “Marse Jack” (473). But again, this uncanny resemblance to the old plantation owner and the old overseer is no mere repetition; there is a development from the old slavery, an increase in both the cunning and the reach of white panoptic power—chiefly through the mechanisms of indoctrination and recruitment. Its recruitment especially of other African-Americans creates the sense of a double-bind experienced by Ellison’s invisible man, both sides

of that bind pitting the issue of race against the invisible man's individual identity. Consider the message in the mysterious letter received by the invisible man while he is still a member of the Brotherhood:

Do not go too fast. Keep working for the people but remember that you are one of us and do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down. You are from the South and you know that this is a white man's world [...] go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people. They do not want you to go too fast and will cut you down if you do. (383)

He later thinks that the handwriting of the letter strongly resembles that of Brother Jack, but this is never proven to be anything more than a strong suspicion. The language of the letter is tellingly ambiguous; the "us" and the "they" can both go either way, speaking of the white Brotherhood *or* the narrator's community of fellow African-Americans. More horrible still to the narrator is how those pronouns could mean the white Brotherhood *and* his own seemingly monolithic black community. Therein lies the challenge to Ellison's protagonist: to not fall into the same confusing trap that Wright's Fred Daniels did—according to Fabre, of failing to elude the burdens of culture and heritage (99)—left feeling lost and without options and running, toward his death, back to the white world that, although it oppresses him, is the only one he apparently knows. Evidence such as Daniels' delight in precious objects, even the money he attempts to reappropriate as wallpaper, points toward panopticism's internalizing effects upon the oppressed subject who, according to Foucault, is "subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around him and upon him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him" (129). And Ellison's protagonist certainly comes close to falling into the same trap, before he fully realizes the importance of his own individual identity; as Pryse

points out, “once in the North, even after Bledsoe’s letter to Emerson destroys his dream of reintegration with his college, Invisible Man continues to associate the pursuit of identity with membership in an organization—Men’s House, the union meeting at Liberty Paints, finally the Brotherhood” (10). The disillusioning outcomes of associating himself with these groups, however, prove crucial to the narrator’s development.

Ellison understood that the price of black individuality was potentially great. White panopticism’s internalizing effects upon its black subjects works hand in hand upon Ellison’s invisible man with the anti-individualistic communal pressures of his fellow African-Americans. As Ellison explains in “Richard Wright’s Blues,” “The pre-individualistic black community discourages individuality out of self-defense. Having learned through experience that the whole group is punished for the actions of a single member, it has worked out efficient techniques of behavior control” (140). Out of this defensive anti-individualism, Ellison clarifies how the “warmth” shown within a southern community’s—especially a *black* southern community’s—regard for its members, compared with the “coldly impersonal relationships” of the “urban industrial community,” is accompanied by “an equally personal coldness, kindness by cruelty, regard by malice” (140). The black individual who breaks away from the community, then, “is apt to be more impressed by its negative than by its positive character” and “becomes a stranger even to his relatives” (140). His family and community’s gestures of protection are thus interpreted as “blows of oppression—from which there is no hiding place” (141). The decision of black individuality is then for Ellison a painful one, and the steps toward the realization of that individuality are equally painful. His surrealism, which is his stylistic communication of the distorting effects of the white panoptic gaze, communicates also the individual’s “awaken[ing] to

the nightmare of his life” (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 142) once he rejects the patterns of both communal conformity and cultural indoctrination.

Ellison also realized the sinister willingness of the New Overseer to exploit such self-defensive and communal anti-individualism and how *collective* rebellion often played right into the hands of white panopticism. This is why what is perhaps the chief manifestation of white panoptic power in Ellison’s novel is the riot in Harlem. The riot is the ultimate diversion strategy of white panopticism in the text, making clear to the narrator the Brotherhood’s intentional absence in Harlem and its cold-blooded willingness to sacrifice individuals for what it sees as the greater good of its political aims. As the narrator tries to explain to Ras:

They planned it. They want the mobs to come uptown with machine guns and rifles. They want the streets to flow with blood, black blood and white blood, so that they can turn your death and sorrow and defeat into propaganda [...] It goes, “Use a nigger to catch a nigger.” Well, they used me to catch you and now they’re using Ras to do away with me and to prepare your sacrifice. (558)

This riot is, of course, rendered in highly surrealistic tones by Ellison. Once he hears the shooting “like a distant celebration of the Fourth of July,” the narrator experiences the “sudden and brilliant suspension of time” (535) that signals the oncoming intensifying of the surrealism: two policemen do not merely shoot, but “thrust flaming pistols before them” (535); the crowds rushing by him are “dark figures in a blue glow” (538); mannequins from a looted department store, resembling gruesomely murdered white women, are hanged from lampposts and other surrounding structures (556); Ras the Destroyer appears on “a great black horse [...] in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders [...] A figure more out of a dream

than out of Harlem” (556); the spear thrown by Ras misses the narrator and instead pierces one of the hanging mannequins (557); and, achieving an almost cartoonish level of violence, the spear thrown back at Ras by the narrator rips through both of Ras’ cheeks and locks his jaws (560). If the New Overseer’s white panoptic gaze distorts the migrant’s sense of reality, then Ellison hints strongly with his nightmarish surrealism that the riot bears all of the distorted hallmarks of white panopticism’s sanction. As an extreme example of white panopticism’s exploitation of the black community’s anti-individualism, the riot thus confirms for Ellison’s narrator how collective action can, in fact, be a trap.

Speaking of his invisible man’s painful process of awakening to self-realization, as well as the dangerous potential for that character’s becoming entangled in the same web of violence as a Bigger Thomas, Ellison explains how the South’s “regressive character” (borne of both oppression by the dominant white culture and the black community’s defensive anti-individualism) can jar certain black individuals into a kind of existential crisis. Such a crisis leads many of these individuals to “flee hysterically into the sleep of violence or the coma of apathy again” (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 142). The invisible man thus possesses the same potential for “terrible honesty” as the considerably more violent Bigger Thomas. His ultimate avoidance of committing murder and the same level of violence perpetrated by Bigger, however, does not diminish his “terrible honesty” credentials. Although the invisible man’s more subversive strategies from his underground space may at first seem less “terrible” in its honesty than Bigger’s more straightforward criminality, it in fact has the potential to be seen as *more* unsettling by whites for its avoidance of the doomed stereotype fulfillment through violent crime that the dominant white structure has come to count on and to use. Ellison seems to stress the importance of individuality by stressing the Brotherhood’s specific use of *mob* violence, in the

form of rioting, as a white panoptic strategy of stereotype fulfillment of black criminality through anger-baiting. In surveying the nightmarish chaos of Harlem in riot, Ellison's narrator understands how Brother Jack had "stumbled upon" a collectively angry black population and used them "to prepare a sacrifice" (564), remembering Brother Hambro's talk of "sacrifice" for the greater good of the Brotherhood (501-502). Given Brother Jack's willingness to coldly exploit those same African-Americans that he recruits for the Brotherhood, the narrator again sees how Jack and the Brotherhood are just another version of what he thought he had escaped in the South, how black migrants like himself end up stuck on the same "old sacrificial merry-go-round" (505). He tries, of course, to explain this to the black people rioting around him—how "they've played a trick on us, the same old trick with new variations" (560)—but he cannot reach them through their blind, long-contained rage. Not that Ellison, through his invisible man, sees the rioters as entirely foolish and misguided; Ellison himself was all too familiar with the trauma that a riot can leave behind, having been only eight years old in Tulsa, Oklahoma, during the 1921 summer riot in that city.⁷⁰ An eight-year-old Ellison realized all too early, according to Jackson, "the danger of having brown skin, and as an adult he would never underestimate the potential scope of white violence" (The Indignant Generation 37). His identification with the rioters in Invisible Man, as well as his sympathy for their motivations, is made clear through his narrator's knowing that "*we* cared" (560)—not "they," but "*we*," and the italics are his own. His observation of the rioters is no distant, abstract condescension; he is among them, one of them,

⁷⁰According to Jackson, during the "Tulsa Race Riot" of June 1, 1921, "the once prosperous black neighborhoods and businesses were obliterated after systematic bombing, looting, and burning by Tulsa whites." The riot began on May 31 during a violent clash outside of the jailhouse where police held a black teen, Dick Rowland, on charges of assaulting a white elevator operator, Sarah Page. A large group of armed black men, mostly veterans, came to protect Rowland until the trial, then thousands of armed white men showed up to lynch Rowland. One might certainly see some autobiographical inspiration for the absurd horror of the final riot scene in Invisible Man given the extreme, almost apocalyptic reaction of the white population: "After airplanes dropped turpentine balls and dynamite over the black community, whites burned down Tulsa's entire proud black business community and shot scores of black men, women, and children" (The Indignant Generation 37).

and fully understands their anger and impulses toward violence; as he recalls, again pondering the negative psychological effects of “invisibility”:

you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. (4)

One can spot the murderous impulse within Ellison's narrator relatively early in the text when, after having realized the trick Dr. Bledsoe has played on him by sending him north with false hopes to Mr. Emerson, feels that he “owe[s] it to the race and to myself” to kill Bledsoe (194), hardly able to sleep for “dreaming of revenge” (195). However, Ellison's “invisible man” achieves his ambiguously hopeful position at the end of the novel by ultimately resisting the impulse to murder—the act which sealed the far less fortunate fates of Lutie and Bigger, and which proves to be a trap of stereotype fulfillment set up within white panopticism. This happens first by accident, then as a conscious decision—first with his falling through the manhole fortunately cutting short a likely murderous pursuit of Brother Jack, then with his decision to not slit the throat of a white man who has just bumped into him and insulted him. Sure, he does beat and kick the man into bloody submission (thus maintaining his credentials for “terrible honesty”!), but he does not kill him (4-5), and this is the move toward nonviolence that so separates him from both Bigger Thomas and Lutie Johnson. He, in fact, is first more successful than both Bigger and Lutie for at least attempting to confront the *direct* source of the white panoptic oppression, Brother Jack, as opposed to Bigger's and Lutie's displaced and misdirected killings of Bessie and Boots, respectively; but it is his serendipitous fall into the

underground and resulting decisions to not murder that allow for at least the hope, the potential, of a more successful rebellion.

IV. *Rediscovering the Trickster*

The chain link given as a gift by Brother Tarp is only one of the weapons used by Ellison's narrator to fight his way past the white police officers and the followers of Ras pursuing him through the chaotic atmosphere of the Harlem riot toward the novel's end—the other weapon being the briefcase given to him *by white people* as part of a scholarship prize for winning the battle royal at the beginning of the novel. The narrator thus reappropriates both black *and* white gifts (the “gift” of the briefcase, considering those who bestow it upon him, perhaps is more deserving of being placed within sarcastic quotation marks than the chain link) to make his way through the chaos of the riot toward his happily accidental discovery of the underground space—again, making it clear that the white panoptic pressures working upon him are not always, well, white. But even the case of Dr. Bledsoe demonstrates how even the most supposedly covert act of only showing/telling white people like the rich patrons from the North what they want to see/hear nonetheless *internalizes* Dr. Bledsoe within the system of white panopticism through indoctrination and recruitment. Even the invisible man himself realizes upon seeing the Harlem riot that, even in his dishonesty toward the Brotherhood, he was nonetheless working for the interests of the organization. The trap that consumes Bledsoe and that the invisible man barely avoids follows Foucault's description of panopticism's internalizing mechanism:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously

upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.

(202-203)

Outright deception, then, is not the answer; it is not a matter of picking a side, but negotiating the very boundaries that define the separation between black and white, good and bad. Such ambiguous measures—the aim of which is to baffle both the direct forces of white panoptic power and fellow members of the black community who have been unwittingly recruited by it—call for the subtlety of archetypal tricksterism, the “masking” discussed by Ellison in “An Extravagance of Laughter” as “more than the adoption of a disguise [but] a playing upon possibility, a strategy through which the individual projects a self-elected identity and makes of himself a ‘work of art’” (629).

In “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” Ellison writes about how he knew “the trickster Ulysses just as early as [he] knew the wily rabbit of Negro American lore” (112), stressing his familiarity with both the ancient trickster figures of canonical western literature and those of African-American folklore, the point being the actual cultural plurality of the *American* identity. Such a deliberate and unashamed owning of every facet of one’s individuality and one’s Americanness provides the means for the narrator to, as Fanon says, “to liberate the black man from himself,” escaping the “zone of nonbeing” (xii) and “double narcissism” of white people’s feeling of superiority and black people’s need to prove themselves (xiv). Rather than lament his sense of dislocation for having to negotiate the margins of the American identity’s absurd landscape, the invisible man learns to embrace it, to slip the rigid prescriptions of both the dominant culture and his own minority community through accepting contradiction and doubleness: “too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much

through love as through hate. So I approach it *through division*. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love” (580, italics added). The distortion-sickness created by the white panoptic gaze stifles the subject’s true, American state of cultural multiplicity; the overarching reason for the invisible man’s staying in his “hole,” after all, is that “up above there’s an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern”—the dominant culture’s norms—in spite of how “men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health” (576). The trick, then, is to side-step the New Overseer’s indoctrinating notions of cultural exclusivity by freely borrowing and reappropriating the past which is every individual’s—especially American individual’s—common inheritance. To do so is the only means of escaping detection by white panopticism as well as white panopticism’s psychological consequences rendered upon its black subjects.

The invisible man’s own reappropriation of “invisibility” is then both a reclamation and a self-affirmation—the initially woeful “I am an invisible man” (3) that opens the novel repeated with celebratory self-discovery; after realizing that his problem was “that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own,” and after years of “trying to adopt the opinions of others” he finally “rebelled,” he says, “I am an *invisible* man” (573), with the italics emphasizing his redefining of the concept. Such a trickster-like decision to work from the boundaries seems the only sane and remotely effective alternative within a society under the distorting white panoptic gaze, what the invisible man describes as “one of the greatest jokes in the world”—“the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he’s going” (577). Within his tricksterism, the invisible man inverts his “invisibility” towards a moral ambiguity—or “irresponsibility,” as he calls it—that refuses the historical burden and anti-

individualistic double-bind imposed by the dominant culture's norms and the New Overseer's controlling, panoptic strategies: "Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility [...] Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (576).

Ellison's ironic means of achieving his protagonist's self-reclamation through tricksterism, again, and more so than both Wright and Petry, links him back to the strategies of Douglass. According to Lewis Hyde, there is a considerable degree of the trickster in Douglass' successful escape of the slavery in the South. Though Hyde grants that "it may seem odd to seek out a vein of trickster consciousness in a person as serious and moralizing as Frederick Douglass" (226), he points out how Douglass' strategies undeniably involve identity inversion and a consistent willingness to work from the boundaries of southern slave society:

Frederick Douglass, in any event, may have been a moralist by temperament, but he was born into a world where two distinct moral systems conflicted, and found himself forced to mediate between them. He was the child of a white man and a black woman in a world where the races were radically separated. After his escape he was a "free slave," a remarkable contradiction in terms. He also had a strong will to test the forbidden, and it kept him on the edge, where others might have accepted the portions they had been offered. (227)

Like Douglass, the invisible man recognizes how he has no conceivable stake in obeying the rules and norms set by the dominant white society whose interests are against his very existence—rules and norms that, in fact, are part of that society's panoptic strategies against him and the rest of the urban black community. As a black migrant from the South confronting the uncanny new slavery of the North, the invisible man too is the paradoxical "free slave," left with the marginal spaces between the New Overseer's rigid definitions as his only resort. As

Douglass “dwelt on the boundaries of plantation culture [and] became a cunning go-between [and] a thief of reapportionment who quit the periphery and moved to the center” (Hyde 227), Ellison’s protagonist also steps “outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and [...] into chaos” (*Invisible Man* 576). Given the unknown that is the new urban environment, such a willingness to embrace the “chaos” serves as an alternative to counter the rigid confines of the New Overseer’s prescribed “reality.”

Again, the key to this formidable, responsibility-shirking “invisibility” is the invisible man’s newly refined individuality. It is this staunch individualism that allows for his much more effective and ambiguously hopeful means of protest, as opposed to the failures of Wright’s and Petry’s respective protagonists. As Heise points out, the arson of the black tenement by its own tenants is an example of how *collective* action can be “suicide” (161), whereas Ellison’s protagonist “heroically” burns the papers in his briefcase that have rigidly identified him up to this point (162). Whereas the collective decision to burn the tenement implies a permanent loss and self-destruction, the invisible man’s act of burning implies a phoenix-like rebirth.⁷¹ But this individualistic “invisibility” is also the key to a new kind of “terrible honesty,” for if the invisible man refuses the responsibility placed upon him by the New Overseer’s normative standards, then the New Overseer is dealing with a much wiler and more subtle adversary, one who does not play by the rules made to keep him in his place to begin with. Ellison’s protagonist has, in effect, refused the “certain significant generality [...] between the least irregularity and the greatest crime” of which Foucault speaks, with the mere “departure from the norm” suddenly equated with the worst criminal offence (299). Moreover, that same adversary, although he has managed to resist murder up to this point, remains ominous for his refusal of blame if that

⁷¹As Jonathan Baumbach writes in “Nightmare of a Native Son,” “The hero’s final loss of illusion forces him underground into the coffin (and womb) of the earth to be either finally buried *or finally reborn*” (14, italics added).

murder were to have been committed; speaking of the man whose throat he could have slit, Ellison's narrator explains, "Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder—I? I don't think so, and I refuse it. I won't buy it. You can't give it to me" (576). In fact, he seems to lay all of the responsibility on the man he nearly killed: "*He bumped me, he insulted me. Shouldn't he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my 'danger potential'?*" (14)

One must remember that even though Ellison has spared his narrator from committing murder, he nonetheless understood that, pondering the invisible man's clarity through self-realization, "the penalty of wakefulness is to encounter ever more violence and horror than the sensibilities can sustain unless translated into *some form of social action*" ("Richard Wright's Blues" 142, italics added). And the invisible man makes it clear that "despite Brother Jack and all that sad, lost period of the Brotherhood, I believe in nothing if not in action," and ominously defines his "hibernation" underground as "a covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). Unlike Wright's Fred Daniels, who resurfaces out of a desperate sense of loss and indoctrinated dependence upon the dominant white world aboveground, Ellison's invisible man hints at a resurfacing that is far from victimized, beaten, and dependent—out of realizing "that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (581). Even as opposed to his initial, unintentional inspiring of the black mob to attack the police officer out of indignation for the old black couple's eviction, the invisible man's future *individual* action hints at something that will far less play into white panopticism's hands. His resurfacing will not be the surrender that Fred's was, but the fruits of a long and ponderous underground preparation for something quite against the interests of the New Overseer. And he will resurface with the terrible zest of a trickster-being unconfined by any expectations confining his self-image and behavior. As if to

firmly establish his invisible man's credibility within "terrible honesty," Ellison writes that his narrator's "memoir" is "one long, loud rant, howl and laugh," with "Confession, not concealment [as] his mode" (111). This is not the kind of one-dimensional lying that makes recruits such as Dr. Bledsoe, but a more fundamental redefining of norms and self that flirts with changing the rules of the game entirely.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

As has already been mentioned at the conclusion of the first chapter, James Baldwin acknowledged how Bigger Thomas serves as a kind of warning, that within every African-American is this “dark and dangerous and unloved stranger” (“Many Thousands Gone” 1669). Of course, Baldwin would also take issue with Wright’s apparent decision to make Bigger an inarticulate and purely representative character, an anti-Uncle Tom devoid of individuality and any real significance beyond his race. However, in 1963, fourteen years after “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and three years after Richard Wright’s death, Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time would be published, a work written in a much different spirit, one that seem much more aligned with Wright’s apparent anger and pessimism. In it, Baldwin apocalyptically insists that the “American Negro past” could very well “rise up [and] smite all of us,” that a “bill” is coming “that I fear America is not prepared to pay” (103). And it is “intransigence and ignorance of the white world” that will make this “historical [...] cosmic vengeance [...] inevitable” (105). The begrudging influence and legacy of not only Wright, but Petry and Ellison as well, thus becomes apparent. This legacy is not only one of these authors’ “terrible honesty,” but the motifs of continued racism (the “new slavery”) as depicted in their particular brand of post-naturalist, panopticism-centered revisions of slave narratives.

Baldwin also views the middle of the twentieth century as an especially appropriate time for “terrible honesty” from an African-American perspective, given the disparity between a supposedly unanimous war-born patriotism and continued prejudice and inequality—even to

black soldiers and veterans: “The treatment accorded the Negro during the Second World War marks [...] a turning point in the Negro’s relation to America. To put it briefly, and somewhat too simply, a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded” (54). That Baldwin is writing this in hindsight, after all of the three authors’ representative works have been published, is especially poignant. One can see in Baldwin’s retrospect the defining significance of Wright, Petry, and Ellison—of their far more provocative approach to exposing and portraying the very human forces of white panopticism acting upon African-American urban migrants, and the resulting anger and hatred felt by those migrants. Since the Emancipation, white oppression has not gone away; it has merely adapted and refined the strategies of the oppression, particularly its panoptic strategies. What, then, is the incentive for African-Americans to “behave” or “play nice”? Beginning with Wright, the apparent answer is that there is no incentive, for the dominant white culture has made it all too clear that it is not interested in equality or relinquishing power. In this sense, slavery never ended.⁷² There is, therefore, no use in being polite. In fact, to be anything less than explosively blunt, as Baldwin seems to hint, would be detrimental to not only the African-American community but America in general: “Any attempt we make to oppose these outbursts of energy is tantamount to signing our death warrant” (91).

The major issues having to do with post-naturalist, African-American narratives of urban migration thus continue from the time of Wright, Petry, and Ellison. Be it surveillance, recruitment, indoctrination/internalization, distortion, the predatory male gaze, or “quarantining” and/or “entombment” through ghettoization, the work of these three authors certainly did not end with them; they had created something that would persist in its confrontational and interrogating

⁷²The title of Douglas A. Blackmon’s 2009 work on post-Emancipation oppression of African-Americans is self-explanatory: Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II.

spirit. Among other examples, one can, for instance, undoubtedly see the “rage” which Baldwin saw at the center of Wright’s use of violence in his works (Nobody Knows My Name 188) in the unflinching literary assault perpetrated by Amiri Baraka. Petry’s issues of motherhood and sexual predation, as well as her diversionary gothic stylings, reverberate in the works of Toni Morrison, especially Beloved. And the African-American individual’s negotiation of a perilous and conspiratorial white-dominated urban society through tricksterism, as evidenced by Ellison with his invisible man, resurfaces quite recently with Easy Rawlins in Walter Mosley’s Devil in a Blue Dress. What is key throughout this continuation of the issues and tropes established by Wright, Petry, and Ellison is the consistent reminder of slavery’s legacy—a reminder that, whether comparatively or impressionistically (as is often the case in Baraka’s plays), serves as both an uncanny haunting and warning towards vigilance against continued white oppression.

I. Slave Narrative, Revisited

To begin a concluding examination of slavery as a consistent motif in post-Wright African-American literature, it is perhaps instructive to begin with the striking case of Margaret Walker’s Jubilee, a bona fide neo-slave narrative, written in 1966, six years after her friend Wright died. Jubilee is not about the “new” slavery, but the old slavery; it is a slave narrative, written from a 1960s African-American female perspective, based upon the stories she had heard as a child from her grandmother about her great-grandmother, who was the real-life Vyry, the novel’s protagonist. It thus serves as a fresh reminder of both the origins of the strategies used against black slaves and the eerie similarities between those strategies and the updated methods of the twentieth century. Walker foreshadows the continuing struggles and worries of post-Emancipation African-Americans through Vyry’s uneasy feeling that, even after the Union

soldiers have pillaged the plantation and announced the slaves' freedom, "an ominous presence were all around her and some terrible thing of frightening dimensions, and yet indescribable, hung over her head" (287). This premonition comes just before she is assaulted by a white scavenger (and rescued by Innis Brown), who serves as a kind of representative and prophetic metaphor for all of the continued dangers and oppression that post-bellum African-Americans will still face. Similarly, though she has Randall Ware, the free black man who is the father of Vyry's children, say this within the context of the Reconstruction, Walker transparently allows the significance of it to reverberate and apply to the time in which she is writing it: "All the violence and killing that colored people have suffered since Freedom may just be a drop in the bucket to what they put on us in slavery time, but God only knows what it will be in the future" (482).⁷³

As far as surveillance goes, Walker's descriptions of the plantation's panoptic strategies for isolating and containing threats against its stability sound disturbingly non-dated, even current. She describes, for instance, how, in the how, in the spring of 1851, a supposed well-developed plot for an uprising among the slaves of Lee County, with the assistance of free black people and white abolitionists, became known to the county's High Sheriff (81), as well as the ensuing crack-down to make an example of those supposedly plotting the uprising by hanging them (82). This crack-down involves "clamp[ing] down harder on the movements of all blacks, enforc[ing] the curfew laws and all of the Black Code, thereby rigorously maintaining control over their [the plantation owners'] property, both land and chattel slaves," as well as moving abolitionists and free black people out of Georgia through intimidation (82). Even on the

⁷³With perhaps less obvious prophecy, Walker earlier has Randall comment on continued racism during the Reconstruction: "Well, they're not going to have it the same way. Freedom won't mean much more than they can't sell us on the auction block [...] But they mean to keep us down under some kind of different system, controlling our labor and restricting our movements, and not allowing us to vote, and trying to keep us ignorant" (472-473). Such methods are certainly not absent in the present day.

plantation, then, there was a kind of ghettoization and movement control, to keep slaves from different plantations from talking too much and sharing ideas with each other, as well as keeping those same slaves from the “contamination” of abolitionist ideas. Also, Randall Ware’s particular troubles as a free black man prove how, similar to the examples of both Wright’s *Cross Damon* and Ellison’s *invisible man*, white panopticism especially targets black individuals who do not conform to (thus confirming) the dominant culture’s proscriptions of whites’ “natural” superiority in terms of intelligence, education, and self-sufficiency. The white power structure seems to take special pains to prevent the free black individual’s “contaminating” example from influencing their (presumably) indoctrinated slaves. As the example of Randall Ware documents, a free black man’s legal status was kept “flimsy” because he must always have a white guardian who can speak for him, and this white guardian must be “a property owner of some means.” Technically, free black people were attached to the land of their white guardians “in much the same manner of a serf or slave,” with their legal status “similar to that of an indentured servant whose time was not his own.” Also, free black people were forced to renew their “free papers” by paying “an exorbitant tax which increased annually.” These free papers must always be found on their persons, and when they traveled from place to place, they “must buy a permit and register in each county [they] entered so that [their] movements could always be checked”; and if, for any reason, these yearly paper assessments could not be produced, these free papers could be taken away and freedom could be revoked (92). Undoubtedly, similar to the absurd experiences of Ellison’s *invisible man*, this created the hopeless and paranoid sense of constantly being followed, watched, scrutinized, and manipulated in terms of one’s movements—all to divert the free, intelligent, and successful black individual’s upsetting influence upon the fictions that make up the dominant white ideology.

To further aid in surveillance, there was also recruitment on the plantation, in the form of black “drivers” and “trusted slaves” (82) who would act as spies, to further control the movements of the slave community from within. However, as the case of Bigger Thomas illustrates, such recruitment is not always a reciprocally conscious decision on the part of the slave; rather, he/she is driven towards or accused of a violent act that sets them up to fulfill and justify the black criminal stereotype and be used as a sacrificial example of the white hegemony’s supremacy and rightness. Walker provides the stunning example of how two black women accused of killing their master and his mother by poisoning their food are convicted of murder and sentenced to be hanged (83). The plantation owners mandate that their slaves witness the hanging, which is on (cruel irony of cruel ironies) the Fourth of July (120).⁷⁴ One is reminded not only of the black migrant community’s self-defensive disavowal of Bigger upon his capture, but of the similar reaction to Joe Hamilton’s arrest and life sentence in Dunbar’s The Sport of the Gods. The purpose, of course, is not only to terrorize the black population with the threat of severe punishment, but to perpetuate the black population’s indoctrinated sense of inferiority and self-loathing through the increased and mandated conspicuousness lent to a disgraced representative of their community.

Such brutal example-making reaffirms an already-existing and deeply-seeded internalization of white ideology by oppressed black subjects. This, like the phenomenon of communal black anti-individualism discussed by Ellison in “Richard Wright’s Blues” (142), is, again, an attempt at communal self-preservation. Take the examples that Walker provides through Uncle Joe and Caline: Uncle Joe, at the secret slave meetings, dismisses talk of freedom as “foolish and dangerous,” preferring to accept “what God told Ham” (that slavery is

⁷⁴This calls to mind Frederick Douglass’ provocative 1852 “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” speech, in which he concludes, “What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? [...] to him, your celebration is a sham” (344).

punishment for being black) and “waiting on the Lord” for freedom (51); and Caline, demonstrates an intraracial class snobbery through her belief that house servants and field hands “just don’t mix,” and insisting that she “ain’t no yard nigger [and] don’t have nothing to do with yard niggers” (85-86). Even Vry herself demonstrates internalization of dominant white standards: when Innis tells her that he was a field hand, she looks “disappointed,” because “[y]ard niggers and field hands didn’t set so high with her” (294); and she does not like the new black community of which she has become a part because they are “too low-class and just nothing but riff-raff” (365); and Innis finally calls her out on it, saying, “You ain’t never been much for field hands no-how. I knows your kind of dicty Big House Miss Ann’s nigger servants” (450). A considerable part of Vry’s triumph at the novel’s conclusion is her eventual acceptance and even love of the community to which she now belongs, perhaps best represented through her ultimate choosing of the less educated but loving, devoted, and (most importantly) present Innis Brown over the more educated and financially successful but absent Randall Ware as her husband. A considerable part of post-bellum black subjects’ triumph, then, is to essentially stop being subjects by undoing the psychological damage perpetrated upon them by the dominant white culture through indoctrination and internalization.

Isolation was an essential prerequisite for the surveillance of slaves on the plantation. Similar to not only Petry’s renderings of inner-city tenements as tombs and torture chambers, but to both Douglass’ and Jacobs’ ominous descriptions of plantations’ typically isolated locations,⁷⁵ Walker describes the remoteness of the plantation of John Dutton, Vry’s master and biological father, in gothic terms; it is like “a great feudal, medieval castle surrounded by water and inaccessible except by a drawbridge over a moat [...] in a most inaccessible section of Georgia—deep in the forest, miles from the cities, and impossible to travel on foot” (35). Such Gothicism,

⁷⁵My Bondage and My Freedom (48-49); Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (160-161).

whether purposeful or accidental, is, again, useful in its truer-to-life portrayal of the plantation owner and overseer as a mad, sadistic patriarch tormenting the victims hopelessly trapped within his lair or domain. However, the new plantation for the twentieth century is, again, the ghetto, to which African-American migrants are consigned within the city; yet Walker shows how the plight of African-Americans just after the Emancipation, even in a rural setting, anticipates the strategies of ghettoization to which the white power structure would resort both later in the post-bellum period and into the twentieth century. Innis explains to Vyry how, based on a conversation he had with an interrogating local white man, so long as they remain living at the undesirable and isolated location of the river bottom, the local white people have no problem with them: “I told him we was living in the country, and when he asked on whose land, I told him we was in the woods and the river bottom and wasn’t nobody nearbouts to us with no land [...] He act kinda satisfied, leastwise he didn’t say nothing else” (328). Through consistently being denied better options, Innis, Vyry, and Vyry’s children are thus moved by racial discrimination into the river bottom, a space, like the ghetto, that the vast majority of the local white people neither want to live in nor visit—in their minds, the perfect place for a black family to live, out of sight and out of mind.

Even beyond Walker’s more literal revisiting of the slave narrative from a twentieth-century standpoint, slavery persists as an image in African-American literature after the middle of the twentieth century. In Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun (1959), Beneatha’s response to Asagai’s notion of curing “the Great Sore of colonialism with Independence” seems appropriate, coming from a disillusioned young African-American living under housing discrimination in the late 1950s: “‘Independence!’ But then what?” (1780) Her response calls to mind the Emancipation and the continued racism and discrimination that would none the less

follow it to the present day. More impressionistically, the image of the slave is a consistent trope in the plays of Amiri Baraka. During the Prologue for The Slave, for instance, Baraka has the black revolutionary leader Walker Vessels come out as “an old field slave” (43), and, as he exits the stage, Vessels grows “anxiously less articulate, more ‘field hand’ sounding” (45). Similarly, in Dutchman, Lula taunts the well-spoken and well-dressed Clay by calling him “an escaped nigger” (1895). Even in the brief glimpse of northern city life that Toni Morrison allows in Beloved reveals a disheartening continuation of the old way of thinking. Upon arriving in Cincinnati to seek work from the white Bodwin siblings, Denver is met by a black housekeeper and old friend of Baby Suggs, Janey Wagon, who explain to Denver how the Bodwins are “good whitefolks” who she “wouldn’t [...] trade for another pair.” Just after, as she is about to leave the Bodwins’ home, Denver notices a very racistly rendered black boy figurine on a shelf by the back door—“a blackboy’s mouth full of money,” with his head “thrown back farther than a head could go” and his moon-like bulging eyes “all the face he had above the gaping red mouth,” and “At Yo Service” painted across the pedestal on which he knelt (300). It is a sober reminder to the young Denver of what she, in fact, must do for the sake of earning money and keeping her family together (not to mention a demeaning and painfully ironic object of welcome to those applying for positions as “the help”!). After Douglass and Jacobs, after Dunbar and Weldon Johnson, and after Wright, Petry, and Ellison, slavery persists not only as a fact of history, but as a haunting and sobering metaphor for continuing white oppression and the continuing contradictions between America’s proclamations of equality and its shameful hypocrisies against that equality, particularly hypocrisies against the African-American community.

II. The New Overseer Continues

Also persistent in African-American literature after Wright, Petry, and Ellison are the issues associated with white panoptic forces within slavery (both old and new)—as previously mentioned: surveillance, recruitment, indoctrination/internalization, distortion, the predatory male gaze, and “quarantining” and/or “entombment” through ghettoization. The key differences in how these issues are handled by later African-American authors are an increased and more consistent self-consciousness and awareness of white panopticism in general and a hopefulness that goes even beyond Ellison’s ambiguity. How different African-American authors from the 1960s to the present react to the continuing issues of white panopticism within these differences, of course, varies—in terms of anger, irony, flamboyance, and humor.

Surveillance, by definition, is perhaps most central to white panopticism. Other issues of white panopticism seem to simply be extensions of it and ways of gathering information on how to further refine it. Surveillance, within the context of white panopticism, thus becomes synonymous with the white gaze, whether that gaze be individual or collective, and is thus the most poignantly felt feature of white panopticism. Accordingly, Amiri Baraka specifically identifies the white gaze as an essential cause of African-American grief in his poem “Words”:
“But the attention. To be always looking, and thinking. To be always under so many things’ gaze, the pressure of such attention” (177). However, he also identifies it, not only specifically but violently, as a specific target of the African-American artist in another poem, “State/meant”:
“The Black Artist must demonstrate sweet life, how it differs from the deathly grip of the White Eyes. The Black Artist must teach the White Eyes their deaths, and teach the black man how to bring these deaths about” (169-170). Baraka seems to understand the complexity of the traumatic effects that the white gaze has upon the African-American psyche—how the surveillance it creates becomes bound up with and motivationally distributed among other

features of white panopticism, such as recruitment and ghettoization, to undermine through a seemingly perpetual visibility African-American individuality, identity, and independence.

The isolating motives behind ghettoization are merely a concentration of surveillance within a more limited space. It is a means of separating through difference and denial the black community from the white status quo, whose peace of mind and self-image are maintained by a continued subjugation of the Other that reaffirms, justifies, and perpetuates white supremacy. With A Raisin in the Sun, Lorraine Hansberry revisits the opening of Native Son—complete with the beginning sound of an alarm clock (1729) and protagonist Walter Younger’s working as a chauffeur for a rich white man, Mr. Arnold (1734)—which focuses on the pressures of housing discrimination working upon the Thomas family (with, of course, an ending that is far less bleak). In Hansberry’s play, Walter bitterly understands this enduring discrimination, as he explains to his mother why he is going to do “business” with “The Man,” Mr. Karl Lindner of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association: “Mama, you know it’s all divided up. Life is. Sure enough. Between the takers and the ‘taken’ [...] Some of us always getting ‘taken’” (1784).

Mr. Lindner presents an ironic case for the new, kinder, gentler slavery. He is a soft-spoken and gentle man—a very different manifestation of white hegemony from anything seen in Wright, Petry, or Ellison—who is offering Walter’s mother her money back with interest for the house in Clybourne Park, a completely white neighborhood, on which she had placed a down payment (1772). However, it is all too clear that Lindner, as a part of this euphemistically titled “Improvement” Association, is attempting to pay the Younger family to maintain housing discrimination and segregation. Directly, he is certainly less brutal than the typical “enforcer,” but his aim is no different. His hints about “some of the incidents which have happened in

various parts of the city when colored people have moved into certain areas” (1771) and how “people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they’ve ever worked for is threatened” (1773) are perhaps as much veiled threats as practical warnings. Lindner’s presence, however timid it is on its own, is none the less ominous for the authority and institution that backs it.

Baraka also addressed ghettoization and housing discrimination in his reinterpretation of Dante’s Inferno, The System of Dante’s Hell, in which he obviously depicts the ghetto as a hell, with the punishments tormenting the “souls” there indicative of the negative psychological effects of environmental racism. One James Karolis, for instance, dies in a bathroom of “old age and segregation” (28), and one bar has an actual white stripe down the center of it to separate black people from white people (133-134). The ghetto, for Baraka, is a negative space (at least before reappropriation), not unlike Ellison’s “nowhere” of Harlem in that “This place is not another” (27). And the “souls” are not of the damned but of “lying saints,” “martyrs,” and “industrial Negroes” (29)—victims sacrificed to the dominant white initiative, not as lucky as Ellison’s invisible man, who discovers the salvation of individuality in spite of both the white panoptic pressures and communal black pressures acting upon him. For Baldwin also, the new slavery of ghettoization apparently played a big part in the more bitter and ominous approach he took with The Fire Next Time: “Here was the South Side—a million in captivity—stretching from this doorstep as far as the eye could see” (61). Toni Morrison, however, with Sula, seems to entertain more irony with ghettoization, with “the Bottom” where the black people of Medallion, Ohio, are consigned actually being the hills that overlook the valley of Medallion proper where all of the white people live (4).

The ghetto's isolation, squalor, and discomfort serves as a tangible environmental sign of white panoptic power that works to not only instill a sense of self-loathing within the sequestered black population, but manipulate that self-loathing toward an internalization of whiteness as the Norm that aids in both conscious and unconscious recruitment (for even the scapegoated black criminal, in spite of how violently he attempts to rail against the white hegemony, is a recruited force). As Baldwin says in The Fire Next Time, "Negroes in this country [...] are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world [...] White people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks [...] and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared" (25-26). He also points out how "Negro servants have been smuggling odds and ends out of white homes for generations, and white people have been delighted to have them do it, because it has assuaged a dim guilt and testified to the intrinsic superiority of white people" (22). Both statements can be applied to the black protagonists of Baraka's plays, who demonstrate both a helplessness and a rage in the face of their own internalization, conscious or unconscious, of the forces working against them, to an extent that often makes them further vulnerable to those same forces.

In The Slave, Walker rails against the established definitions of white "logic" to a fundamental degree, concluding that "just because they're *right*...doesn't mean anything. The very rightness stinks a lotta times" (45).⁷⁶ In Dutchman, Lula seems to actually sense Clay's suppressed feelings of guilt for his own assimilation into white society, and she uses this guilt to goad him towards a violent outburst. She tells him, "And why're you wearing a jacket and tie like that? [...] Boy, those narrow-shoulder clothes come from a tradition you ought to feel oppressed by [...] Your grandfather was a slave, he didn't go to Harvard" (1891). Even while

⁷⁶Baraka makes specific reference to Native Son in The Slave. Reacting to Walker's violent display, Grace says, "Mrs. Vessels is playing the mad scene from Native Son [...] A second-rate Bigger Thomas [...] You still at it, huh, Bigger?" (57)

trying to get him to dance with her, she calls him a “middle-class black bastard” and says, “You ain’t no nigger, you’re just a dirty white man” (1895). She even seems to hit a note of sympathetic rebellion, telling him, “Don’t sit there dying the way they want you to die” (1896). However, even this is a deliberate provocation which leads to the violent outburst which results in Clay’s being stabbed to death by Lula. If Lula’s provoking and then stabbing of Clay in Dutchman proves anything, it is how a chief strategy of white panoptic power is to manipulate black subjects toward a violence and/or criminality that legitimizes the dominant white culture’s subjugation of black individuals.

In Great Goodness of Life, Baraka provides what is perhaps his strongest and most upsetting metaphor for an individual black man’s self-denying and self-betraying assimilation into white-dominated society. Court Royal proclaims his innocence by saying, more than once, “I’ve worked at the Post Office for thirty-five years. I’m a supervisor. There must be some mistake” (227). The ultimate, self-betraying confirmation of his internalization of the standards of white society, however, comes in his denial of knowing the many-faced “murderer” that he is on trial for harboring—those many faces representing Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Marcus Garvey, Medgar Evers, and several anonymous young black boys killed by the police (234)—as well as his giving the “final instruction” to the young black man who had been pleading with him from the shadows at the beginning of the play. This “final instruction” is the shooting of this young black man in the face with a silver bullet from a pistol made of diamonds and gold (237), indicating Court’s acceptance of white materialism over his own racial/historical identity, further confirmed by Court’s coming back to reality and his assimilated existence from this apparent impressionistic dreamscape, saying, “Hey, Louise, have you seen my bowling bag? I’m going down to the alley for a minute” (239). Baraka manages to make

Court's almost cheerfully oblivious survival somehow more tragic than both the arguable martyrdom of a Bigger Thomas or Lutie Johnson and the ambiguously hopeful potential of an invisible man.

As Ellison establishes with Invisible Man, the surveillance of the white gaze not only sees, but distorts, for its panopticism is a function of its desire to control any potential threats to its endurance. The alienating effects of white panopticism upon black subjects through indoctrination/internalization are, then, not grounded in truth, but the standards of the dominant white ideology. Stylistically, there are not only echoes of Ellison's surrealism in African-American ventures into impressionism, or at least flirtations with it. Morrison's Sula continues the surrealistic approach with a whimsical distance that resembles a fable. One man's, Shadrack's, attempt to come to terms with his traumatized, post-World War I sense of societal aloofness results, by the end of the novel, in the absurd death of most of the population of the Bottom. Shadrack's initially solitary annual parade-celebration of his self-created National Suicide Day holiday, insidiously finds its way sympathetically into the collective psyche of the black population in the Bottom (14-15). After the death of the outrageously and scandalously individualistic Sula, the Bottom's social stability degenerates because, without Sula, the townspeople no longer have the common source of "evil" to inspire their collective and communally-binding moral indignation. So on the first Suicide Day after Sula's death, most of the Bottom follow Shadrack on his parade, vandalizing the construction site at the tunnel where black workers were denied employment, and most of them drowning in the process (161-162). The novel's conclusion should be bleaker, with so many people dead, including the title character, and yet its absurdity and distance render it somehow less bleak than, say, The Street and in the same neighborhood of ambiguity as Invisible Man.

Again, Baraka is perhaps the most obvious example of an impressionistic interpretation of white panoptic distortion. In Great Goodness of Life, his depiction of Court Royal's court-appointed attorney, John Breck, is especially grotesque in its representation of the attorney's self-debasing, automaton-like enslavement to the dominant white society through his service within its legal system:

[A bald-headed smiling house slave in a wrinkled dirty tuxedo crawls across the stage; he has a wire attached to his back leading offstage. A huge key in the side of his head. We hear the motors 'animating' his body groaning like tremendous weights. He grins, and slobbers, turning his head slowly from side to side. He grins. He makes little quivering sounds] (228)

Breck speaks via "deliberating motors" (228), telling Court that his only chance is to plead guilty (229). Momentarily (and absurdly) distracted from his inexplicable and perilous situation, Court asks Breck what happened to him, and he tells him he's always looked like this (229). Upon his initial refusal to plead guilty, Breck leaving, crawling away: "Goodbye, dead sucker! [...]" Hahahaha, ain't I a bitch...I mean, ain't I?" (230). Even Court himself, in a similarly absurd and even comic manner, suddenly does "a weird dance like a marionette," speaking gibberish, with everybody laughing, then abrupt cessation.

There is a single moment of similar representation in A Raisin in the Sun, but with more of a flirtation with impressionism than a complete embracing of it. It is perhaps the most disturbing moment in the play, when Walter horrifies his family by getting down on one knee, apparently rehearsing what he will say to Mr. Lindner while accepting the buy-back of the Clybourne Park house:

Maybe—maybe I’ll just get down on my black knees [...] Captain, Mistuh, Bossman. [*He starts crying.*] A-hee-hee-hee! [*Wringing his hands in profoundly anguished imitation.*] Yassuh! Great White Father, just gi’ ussen de money, fo’ God’s sake, and we’s ain’t gwine come out deh and dirty up yo’ white folks neighborhood...[then breaking down completely] (1786)

What begins as a half-comical imitation quickly starts to resemble a regressive possession, as though, in that moment, Walter actually becomes a slave. Such stylistic representations of the white panoptic gaze’s distorting effects, again, have a way of conjuring the ghost of slavery, revealing the perpetuation of slavery through new forms and strategies as perhaps the chief aim of white panoptic distortion.

There are also, however, less grotesque and more straightforward portrayals of the dominant white culture’s attempts to distort reality—by distorting the facts through misinformation. Even in the midst of the heavy impressionism of Great Goodness of Life, for example, Baraka has the judge order that the newspapers be called and given the “official history” of the death of the black “Prince” on the stretcher (a thinly veiled reference to Malcolm X), saying that “We banged him down [but] A nigger did it for us” (233-234). At varying levels of intensity, then, African-American literature after Wright, Petry, and Ellison still addresses the distorting effects of the white panoptic gaze on the two fronts of subject matter and stylistic mimesis of that subject matter.

In spite of the differences of approach among these various African-American authors since Wright, Petry, and Ellison—as well as the variety in what particular issues and tropes of white panopticism on which these authors choose to focus—“terrible honesty” seems a requirement in how they present their work. In their choosing to address the same issues of

white panopticism, urban migration, and urban racism, those African-American authors following Wright, Petry, and Ellison unavoidably cross paths with the legacy of these three authors. And, in the wake of Wright, who arguably marks the beginning of this “terrible honesty,” to coyly return to an approach even remotely safe and disingenuous seems unthinkable. Therefore, and appropriately, this “terrible” attitude persists in the African-American literary treatment of social ills with which black Americans have been long familiar.

III. The Terrible Legacy

Amiri Baraka certainly upped the ante on Wright’s shot across the bow in terms of anger, brutality, and honesty in his work. Indeed, Baraka seems to be the next logical step beyond Wright in his use of even less subversion and irony in favor of a purer and far less ambiguous provocation. In fact, Baraka seems to define a bona fide literary theory for unapologetic candor in African-American literature. To him, black art is fundamentally “terrible”; he confrontationally defines the fundamental aim of black art as the creation of poems and other literary works “that kill [...] Setting fire to whities ass” (“Black Art” 219), and that the role of the black artist in America is “to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it” (“State/meant” 169). And “A POEM SOME PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO UNDERSTAND” almost reads like an advertisement, based upon personal experience, for “terrible honesty”: “I had thought, before, some years ago / that I’d come to the end of my life. / Watercolor ego. / Without the preciseness / a violent man could propose” (210). He seems to come to the extreme conclusion that any approach short of downright dangerous is weak and ineffective—that a patient, nonviolent approach would make for a help that would simply not arrive in time to serve the very urgent matters at hand, those matters being the continued and systematic oppression and

destruction of the African-American population. As he expresses at the conclusion of “A POEM SOME PEOPLE WILL HAVE TO UNDERSTAND,” “We have awaited the coming of a natural / phenomenon. Mystics and romantics, knowledgable / workers / of the land. / But none has come. / (*Repeat*) / but none has come. / Will the machinegunners please step forward?” (210-211)

With Dutchman, Baraka provides an especially extensive meditation on what he sees as the necessary danger and terror behind all black art. In this play, he seems to expand his exploitation of white fears to encompass the very motives behind African-American literature and art in general, undercutting and undermining whites’ shallow patronage of black music and other arts. After being extensively taunted by the white Lula with racial epithets, with her sexuality, for not fulfilling her stereotypical expectations, and for being dressed in a suit (like a white man), Clay finally explodes, slapping her twice before saying:

I could murder you now [...] And all these weak-faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too [...] They say, “I love Bessie Smith.” And don’t even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, “Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass.” [...] All the hip white boys scream for Bird [Charlie Parker]. And Bird saying, “Up your ass, feeble-minded ofay! Up your ass” [...] Bird would’ve played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw. (1896-1897)

Through Clay’s catharsis, Baraka presents black art as an alternative not so far removed from violent revolt, if not murder. Furthermore, he provides Lula with an unsettling and apocalyptic image of what might apparently might happen in the absence of black art, if African-Americans should decide to completely internalize white logic (the stinking “rightness” mentioned by

Vessels in The Slave). He tells Lula to warn her father against “preach[ing] so much rationalism and cold logic to these niggers,” and rather let them “sing curses at you in code”; for if he should continue his indoctrination of black people concerning the supposed historical superiority of white education and intellectualism, maybe those same black people will “begin to listen,” and with “no more blues” and the ostensible triumph of the white way over black art, “all of those ex-coons will be stand-up Western men, with eyes for clean hard useful lives, sober, pious and sane, and they’ll murder you. They’ll murder you, and have very rational explanations. Very much like your own” (1898). The “terrible honesty” of African-American art is, Baraka seems to argue, is thus an uneasy necessity, a means of letting play out through fiction the potentially violent frustrations that are the result of a long history of cultural subjugation.

If Baraka’s artistic methodology is shocking, especially to American white people, Baldwin points out the hypocrisy within such shock and indignation, pointing to the fact that, in the turbulent and revolutionary history of the United States, “violence and heroism have been made synonymous except when it comes to blacks” (The Fire 58).⁷⁷ The real reason, Baldwin continues, for this outrage, as well as its resulting indoctrination of African-Americans that non-violence is a perceived virtue in black people, is that white people “do not want their lives, their self-image, or their property threatened” (59). Such threatening stirrings simply go against the dominant culture’s interests, for it upsets their notions of superiority and exposes their hypocrisy. However, what these members of the dominant culture do not seem to understand is how such revolutionary gestures are, indeed, quite American and quite fitting as artistic and activist contributions to American society. It is in this “terrible” revolutionary spirit that black writers and artists prove their very status and credentials as Americans, for the fate of African-Americans is inextricably bound with the fate of the nation within which they have historically

⁷⁷Baldwin is specifically referring to white indignance towards Malcolm X.

experienced so much strife and subjugation. Unavoidably, they have a stake in the fate of America as well, and the “terrible” contribution of black artists in particular attests to the urgency of that stake.

Along with fiction, the “terrible honesty” of these authors has also apparently inspired a more vigilant awareness of the various methods and manifestations of white panopticism, as evidenced by a similar honesty taken within recent social-sciences works. Michelle Alexander’s 2012 work The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, for instance, sheds light on the continuing methodologies of slavery and Jim Crow within the American criminal justice system, pointing out how, rather than relying on race, “we use our criminal justice system to label people of color ‘criminals’ and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind,” and that it is “perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans” (2), the vast majority of these “criminals” being unfairly and disproportionately targeted African-Americans. She further points out the connection between this mass incarceration and other discriminating trajectories of white panopticism—how these “criminals” are “subject to legal discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits, and jury service, just as their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents once were” (1-2). The last detail is especially significant in how it communicates the tragic and depressing consistency with which limitations have been historically imposed upon the civil liberties of African-Americans. She provides the particularly stunning and historically charged real-life example of Jarvis Cotton, whose great-great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. And today, Jarvis Cotton

cannot vote because he, “like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole” (1).⁷⁸

In the same spirit, Tom Burrell addresses the negative effects of stereotyping advertising upon African-Americans—what he describes as “the mindless perpetuation of the ‘black inferiority’ or BI campaign” (1)—in his 2010 work Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority. Burrell goes beyond the obvious grocery-listing of black stereotypes perpetuated within advertising to also examine what he sees as the misguided cultural assumptions behind this stereotyping that attempts to legitimize it and make it “okay.” To him, the myth of a “post-racial society” in the Age of Obama is solidified through the perpetuation of the illusion that anyone can succeed—what he calls the “paradox of progress”—thus weakening the impulse to understand or help those, perhaps borrowing a phrase from Invisible Man, “still scorched at the bottom of America’s melting pot” (4).⁷⁹ It fuels the perception that “all is well and ‘racism is dead,’” and suggests that “those still wallowing in poverty made conscious choices to live in that stratum” (4). Such assumptions perpetuate the modern-day enslavement of less fortunate members of the African-American community by encouraging apathy and social neglect. And this is compounded with the obviously negative effects upon individual and collective African-American self-image and self-esteem that the stereotyping advertising images themselves create.

The new levels of artistic provocation introduced by Wright, Petry, and Ellison were a reaction to the clincher of continued discrimination against African-Americans even into the

⁷⁸The influence of the “terribly honest” African-American writers on Alexander’s work is clear from the title of her work’s sixth and particularly incendiary chapter, “The Fire This Time,” an obvious nod to Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time.

⁷⁹“Out of the fire and into the melting pot” (Invisible Man 152).

middle of the twentieth century, almost eighty years after the actual freeing of the slaves and even amidst the supposed patriotic unanimity of World War II. Central to the urgency within these authors' artistic reactions is an increased cognizance of the game rigged against them and their fellow black citizens by the dominant culture through white panopticism. Their "terrible honesty" is a direct response to those panoptic strategies, which these authors recognized as the means through which the dominant white culture perpetuates the goals of slavery even after slavery's supposed abolishment. Authors before them certainly recognized this, but it is these three, beginning with Wright, who seem to have taken the initiative to an intensity and a consistency never before seen. And, as evidenced by the works of other and later black writers such as Baldwin, Baraka, Morrison, Ishmael Reed, the early work of Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, and Walter Mosley—as well as the nonfictional social studies of Alexander and Burrell—the daring steps taken by these three authors marked a development from which there was no going back, given the recognized urgency of what is at stake.

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