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**Unconscious Spatial Reading for Self-Placement: Bigger Thomas  
in Richard Wright's *Native Son***

Koffitse Akade\*

**Abstract**

The hypothesis of this paper is that 'space' often has a prominent impact on its residents in the sense that it can construct and deconstruct their identity. This article aims at retracing, in *Native Son* (N.S.), first, how its author, Richard Wright, causes Bigger to dislike his new living space in the white neighborhood, second, how Bigger is made to develop an inclination for the same white neighborhood, and third, how the author strategizes the embodiment of the idea of an interracial nation. Psychoanalysis is the theoretical approach used to scrutinize the work and bring the reader to discover the nature of human interaction with his environment, be it virtual or real. The paper is structured around three parts: first, Bigger's dialogue with the real-life America and his aversion for the white neighborhood, second, Bigger's dialogue with the virtual white neighborhood and his choice to accept it. The final section will elaborate on the making of a multiracial nation.

**Keywords** : Space, identity, psychoanalysis, interracial, self-placement.

**Résumé**

Cette étude est basée sur l'hypothèse que l'espace exerce une importante influence sur ses résidents, en ce sens qu'il peut construire et déconstruire leur identité. Elle vise à retracer, dans *Native Son* (N.S.), la manière dont l'auteur, Richard Wright, amène Bigger à, dans un premier temps, détester le quartier blanc, dans un second temps, désirer ce même cadre de vie, et enfin, faire ressortir les stratégies mises en place pour concrétiser l'idée d'une nation interraciale. La psycho-analyse est l'approche théorique utilisée pour lire l'ouvrage et amener le lecteur à découvrir la nature de l'interaction humaine avec l'espace, que celui-ci soit virtuel ou réel. Cette étude est structurée en trois parties : primo, le dialogue de Bigger avec l'Amérique des réalités et son aversion pour le

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\* Université de Lomé (Togo), [medardakade@gmail.com](mailto:medardakade@gmail.com)

quartier blanc, secondo, le dialogue de Bigger avec le quartier blanc virtuel et son choix à l’accepter. La dernière partie s’appesantit sur la création d’une nation multiraciale.

**Mots-clés** : Espace, identité, psycho-analyse, interracial, auto-insertion.

### Introduction

Bigger Thomas of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* is offered the job as the chauffeur of the Daltons, a wealthy white American family. The period running from that day to the day of the job interview is central to Bigger’s life for he has to decide whether to take the job or not to take it, which implies his reading of the white space. Actually, Bigger lives in a suburb of Chicago and the Daltons live in the white neighborhood of the same town. Due to the policy of discrimination and segregation against blacks, black males were not allowed to be seen in the white parts of the town (Green, 1936). As a result, Bigger has to make sure the white neighborhood is a comfortable ‘space’ before accepting the offer, given that his acceptance of the job implies his placement into the said space. This implies his need to be understood from his personality and the analysis of his unconscious. Andreas Glaeser (1998), Pamessou Walla (2013), and Rita Barnand (2001), have, in one way or the other, admitted that identity can be constructed or deconstructed in dialogues with both a physical space/environment and the human beings residing in it. However, they fail to see that human personality is complex and that a given space-seeker may dislike a targeted space any time soon, but burn for it later. In this regard, this article aims at retracing, how Wright creates Bigger as an ambivalent character as he chooses to hate and like the white neighborhood, and how Wright makes the fabric of an interracial nation possible. In consideration of the aforementioned objective, this paper uses psychoanalytical literary theory to provide strong hypothetical answers to the above questioning to have the reader understand the shifting nature of human interaction with space.

Basing on works by scholars such as Benvenist (1971), Mead (1962), Wittgenstein (1984), Danto (1985), and Ricoeur (1992), Glaeser first defines identity “as the meaning of a self to itself or to others” (8). Second, she assumes that “meaning creation consists basically in an act of contextualization, i. e. an act of linking” (8). Finally, she concludes that “selves too are made meaningful (selves are conferred an identity) by connecting them to something else through that act of contextualization.

If identifications are repeated and sustained in agreement with other persons, and thus stabilized, Glaeser holds, they congeal into parts of identities (8).

Taking Glaeser views as the starting point of the working definition of identity, this paper considers identity as the result of the contrasting process of one individual to another/others. Differently put, an individual's identity is their being without the mass identity they share with other fellow individuals. Space is considered as a “chronotope,” “the organizing centers for fundamental narrative events of the novel, the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied, primary means of materializing time in space, centers for concretizing representation, and a force giving body to the entire novel (Bakhtin 250, as cited in Glaeser 25). Better still, space is considered as a “concrete chronotope,” the “concrete spatio-temporal micro-element” (Glaeser 26), within which the dominant spatial element swallows the temporal one in the context of a novel. To highlight the relation between setting and identity, Walla has it to say that “though the setting generally represents the space where and the time when the action of a play, a novel, or any other piece of creative writing takes place, it encapsulates social, political, and religious interferences or implications” (121). From that perspective, the white neighborhood, as a physical environment with human beings acting and interacting therein with one another, is the setting under consideration in this paper. It reflects the political, religious and economical values of its white inhabitants.

Based on the argument that ... before deciding to move or not move to a space people plan to live in on a regular basis, people assess the convenience between the said space and themselves, taking into account atmosphere, beauty, social relations, wealth, and power (Glaeser 10), Wright undertakes to accomplish these goals: reveal the inappropriateness between the white environment and Bigger's kind to cause him disdain the said place first, reveal the appropriateness between the place and Bigger's kind to make Bigger like the place second, and embody the idea of a multiracial nation third.

## 1. Dialogue with the Real-Life America and his Aversion for the White Neighborhood

This chapter is meant to shed light on how Wright, in order to have Bigger decide not to move to the white neighborhood, has the latter notice no fitting between his kind and the said space.

First, Wright confronts his readers with a racial issue as he makes Bigger show a repellent reaction to a white portrait plastered onto a poster. Indeed, the poster rings a bell to Bigger: “That’s Buckley!” (N. S. 12), Bigger said when his sight is caught by the poster described as follows:

The white face was fleshy but stern; one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passer-by. The poster showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it, it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. Above the top of the poster, were tall red letters: YOU CAN’T WIN! (N.S. 12-13)

In the light of psychoanalysis, the above description carries a few intended meanings. First, with the paradox “fleshy but stern white face,” Wright might insinuate the double-faced individual the white person is, to warn the black person not to rely on the white. Second, with the behavior-pattern “one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passer-by” wright creates a metaphor for white America police control over the Negroes. Third, with the pattern of action “... looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it, it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout,” Wright might aim at raising Bigger’s awareness the impossibility for a Negro to escape the spying supervision of the white. Fourth, with the tall red letters reading “YOU CAN’T WIN!” Wright might symbolize the threatening America to display the inevitable victory of the white over the Black. In other words, with those tall red letters, Wright predicts a Black’s fate as conceived by white America. By having Bigger shake head, mumble, and say “You crook. You let whoever pays you off win!” (N. S. 13) Wright shows Bigger’s disappointment. Finally, with the metaphor “... it stopped, like a movie blackout” Wright foreshadows his future strategy of lulling Bigger

into watching a movie to cause his inclination for the white space. In effect, after letting Bigger realize the futility of his life, Wright makes Bigger burn to see a movie: “his senses hungered for it. In a movie, he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open” (N. S. 13).

Second, Wright provokes a meeting between Bigger and Gus, one of the members of his gang. That meeting is conceived as an umbrella strategy for minor strategies. The first minor strategy is their conversation that reads as follows:

“Kinda warm today.”

“Yeah.”

“You get more heat from this sun than from them old radiators at home.”

“Yeah; them old white landlord sure don’t give much heat.”

“And they always knocking at your door for money.”

“I’ll be glad when summer comes”

“Me too” (N. S. 16).

In light of psychoanalysis, it can be argued that with the dialogue, Wright reminds Bigger of the paradoxes of his life in order to foreshadow the miserable future living conditions Bigger would have to face in the white neighborhood. The second minor strategy is the gymnastics of a ‘strange’ plane that draws zigzags in the sky with its smoke. On beholding the strange plane, Bigger and Gus exchanges the following words:

“Look!”

“What?”

“That plane writing up there.”

“Looks like a little bird,”

“Them white boys sure” can fly,”

“Yeah, they get a chance to do everything. (N.S.16, 17...)

In the light of psychoanalysis, the plane might symbolizes the superiority of the white person over the black person. With the above strategies indeed, Wright raises Bigger’s awareness about the ‘reality,’ of the antagonism between whites’ living conditions and blacks’ living conditions in almost all domains of life. The exhibits are Bigger’s feeling of deep indignation: “It’s funny how the white folks treat us, ain’t it?” (N. S. 17), “They don’t let us do nothing. ...Every time I think about it, I feel like somebody’s poking a red-hot iron down my throat. ...We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain’t.

They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time, I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence" (N. S. 20)... "Why they make us live in one corner of the city?" (N. S. 21). "They got everything. They own the world" (N. S. 22). In the light of psychoanalysis, this paper sustains that Wright causes Bigger indignation to show strong disdain towards the white neighborhood. As evidence, Bigger confesses: "I'd just as soon go to jail as take that relief job" (N. S. 33). Bigger is advised that a Negro among white lives like a mouse among cats, which is why he thinks that 'he should take his knife and his gun because he was going among white people" ((N. S. 48).

In sum, it is obvious that Wright has had Bigger dislike the white environment by showing him the threatening white portrait and causing him meet Gus.

## **2. Dialogue with the Virtual America and his inclination for the White Neighborhood.**

This chapter is meant to shed light on how Wright has Bigger experience a virtual commuting (migration without moving physically to the intended destination) from his black guetto to the white part of Chicago and subsequently creates an artificial inclination for the white neighborhood in him.

To create in Bigger an illusory interest in living among whites, Wright shows him this first episode:

The organ stopped and the screen flashed with the rhythm of moving shadows. Bigger sat looking at the first picture; it was a newsreel. As the scene unfolded, his (Bigger's) interest was caught and he leaned forwards. He saw images of smiling dark-haired white girls, lolling on the gleaming sand. Palm trees stood near and far. The voice of the commentator ran with the movements of the film: 'Here are the daughters of the rich taking sunbaths in the sands of Florida. This little collection of debutantes represents over four billion dollars of the America's wealth and over fifty of America's leading families.' (N. S. 34)

In the light of psychoanalysis, the aforementioned episode might be meant to increase Bigger's desire to live with Mary by all means. As a matter of fact, under the spell of the virtual world, Bigger feels mistakenly disillusioned. The exhibit is the feelings Bigger shows in his conversation with Gus just after watching the said episode. The dialogue reads:

“Some babies,” Jack said.

“Yeah, man!”

“I’d like to be there.”

“You can, but you’d be hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas ...” (N. S. 14).

Truly in the light of psychoanalysis, it may well be said that “the smiling dark-haired girls, lolling on the gleaming sand,” and the “palm trees standing near and far” are characters, symbols, archetypes, images and patterns of actions jointly used to haunt Bigger in his dreams, form the substance of his past psychic life and cause him to recognize them at some unconscious level of his psyche and subsequently provoke his love for the place. By so doing in truth, Wright allows for the emergence of imageries of beach scenes and high life with which he baits Bigger for these are the components of the latter’s unconscious.

To increase Bigger’s interest in the white neighborhood, Wright shows Bigger this second episode in which he turns his camera onto Mary Dalton and her communist lover:

The scene shifted to and fro over the glittering sands. Then Bigger saw in a close-up the picture of a slight, smiling white girl whose waist was encircled by the arms of a man. He heard the commentator’s voice: ‘Mary Dalton, daughter of Chicago’s Henry Dalton, 4605, Drexell Boulevard, shocks society by spurning the boys of La Salle Street and the Gold Coast and accepting the attentions of a well-known white radical while on her recent winter vacation in Florida.....’ The close-up showed the smiling girl kissing the man, who lifted her up and swung her round from the camera.’ (N.S. 35)

A psychoanalysis of the above excerpt can drive the reader to argue that, inasmuch as Wright knows that Bigger loves stress-free life; women, beach, pool-room, movie, cigarettes, drinks, music, fun; Wright sparks carefree-like life at Bigger in order to cause him to like the place. It is even predictable that on the terrain of politics, Bigger might feel comfortable while living with Mary in the Daltons’ home because Mary “spurns the boys of La Salle Street and Gold Coast,” but “accepts the attention of a well-known white radical.” If a communist is accepted by Mary, Bigger might think, then Bigger will be accepted by Mary, which is why Bigger is eager to take the job, as the following conversation with Jack just after the foregoing scene reveals it:

“Say, Jack?”

“Hunh?”

“That gal. ... That gal there in that guy’s arms. ... That’s the daughter of the guy I’m going to work for. They live at 4605 Drexel. ... That’s where I’m going tonight to see about that job. ...”

“For real?”

“Sure!” (N. S. 35)

To moreover sharpen Bigger’s desire towards living among whites, Wright shows Bigger this third attractive episode:

The close-up faded and the next scene showed only the girl’s legs running over the sparking sands; they were followed by the legs of the man running in pursuit. The words droned on: ‘Ha! He’s after her! There! He’s got her! Oh, boy, don’t you wish you were down here in Florida?’ The close-up faded and another came, showing two pairs of legs standing close together. Oh, boy! said the voice. Slowly, the girl’s legs strained upwards until only the tips of toes touched the sand. Ah, the naughty rich! There was a slow fade-out, which the commentator’s voice ran on: ‘Shortly after a scene like this, shocked Mama and Papa summoned Mary home by wire from her winter vacation and denounced her communist friend. (N.S. 35)

In the light of psychoanalytic criticism, it can be said that Wright has caused Bigger deem the Daltons’ home comfortable. The proof is the satisfaction feelings Bigger shows after the episode:

“Say, Jack?”

“Yeah.”

“She was a hot-looking number, alright.”

“Sure. When you start working there, you gotta learn to stand in with her. Then, you can get everything you want, see? These rich folks do their dirt in the sly. I bet the reason the old man was so mad about that communist was ‘cause his gal was too open about it.”

“Yeah; maybe so,” said Bigger.

“Them rich white women’ll go to bed with anybody, from a poodle on up. They even have their chauffeurs. If you come across anything too much for you to handle at that place, let me know.” (N. S. 35-36)



With *Trader-Horn* actually, Bigger's imaginary is violated to such an extent that he seems to doubt his first convictions about the white neighborhood. He thus experiences a dilemma and wonders if "what he had heard about rich white people was really true. If he was going to work for people like you saw in the movie? If he were, then he'd see a lot of things from the inside; he'd get the dope, the low-down" (N. S. 36). The outcome of that dilemma is that Bigger seems more inclined to believe in his virtual knowledge about his new space than he is to believe in his real/true knowledge thereabout. The proof is his following monologue through the narrator's voice: "He was a fool for wanting to rob Blum's just when he was about to get a good job. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Why take a fool's chance when other things, big things, could happen? If something slipped out this evening, he would be out of a job and in jail, maybe. And he wasn't so hot about robbing Blum's, anyway" (N. S. 37). From that perspective, a good psychoanalyst might infer that Bigger feuds with Gus on the ground that the latter is responsible for the failure of their plan to rob Bloom in order to rid himself from the gang and feel free to take the job. Indeed, the omniscient narrator remarks that "he was relieved and glad that in an hour he was going to see about that job at the Dalton place, disgusted with the gang, and knew that what had happened today put an end to his being with them in any more jobs" (N. S. 47). The outcome is Bigger's promise to his mother to go and "see about that job" (N. S. 48).

In a nutshell, it is obvious that Wright has had Bigger accept his new space by showing Bigger three different attractive movie episodes.

### 3. The Making of a Multiracial Nation

In this chapter, light is shed on how Wright strategizes the creation of an interracial nation of whites and blacks.

Actually, in order to conceptualize an interracial nation of whites and blacks, Wright exploits a number of literary devices among which the following literary technique known as situational irony:

.....But while walking through this quiet and spacious neighborhood, he did not feel the pull and the mystery of the thing as strongly as he had in the movie. The houses he passed were huge; lights glowed softly in windows. The streets were empty, save for an occasional car that zoomed past on swift rubber tires. This was a cold and distant

world of white secrets carefully guarded. He could not feel a pride, a certainty, and a confidence in these streets and houses. He came to Drexel Boulevard and began to look for 4605. When he came to it, he stopped and stood before a high, black, iron picket fence, feeling constricted inside. All he had felt in the movie was gone; only fear and emptiness filed him now. ... Suppose a policeman saw him in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to robe or rape somebody. Why has he come to take this goddamn job? He would have stayed among his own people and escaped this fear and hate. This was not his world. He had been foolish in thinking that he would have liked it. (N. S. 49-50)

On reading the above situational irony, the reader notices that Bigger is disappointed, disillusioned, because he unexpectedly notices that the real-life white neighborhood is far different from the virtual white neighborhood. From that perspective, the psychoanalytic reader, in line with the logic of Wright's strategy, might foretell that Bigger would go back to his decision.

Surprisingly however, Wright introduces another situational irony as follows:

“Timidly, he lifted the latch on the gate and walked to the steps. .... The door opened. ... He edged through the door slowly, ... He went into the dimly lit room. ... He sat ... He followed the man out of the room and down the hall. ‘You think you can handle that?’ ‘Oh, yessuh.’” (N S pp 50-57)

On reading that second situational irony, the reader is aware that Wright, instead of having Bigger go back to his decision as expected, rather has him persist and take the job. Taking that into account, the psychological reader might wonder why Wright, though knowing that his objective is not to cause Bigger to dislike the place, lulls Bigger into noticing the blank dissimilarity between the two worlds. To that wonder, this paper provides two answers. First, Wright awakens consciousness about the disappointment most commuters experience when they base their reason to commute to a place on the virtual-based knowledge they have of the said place. Second, Wright “opens some micro-settings, such as the Daltons’ place and Bigger’s prison, up to turn them into parliaments, places of debates” (Barnand 159). Actually, when elaborating on the

legendary role that some kinds of places play in the building of a nation, Barnard has it to say:

...The history of struggle has shown that the potential of transformation can be born from a geography of oppression: even enforced movements through a country's territories (e.g. commuting from a black township to a white city, or from a rural "homeland" to a mine compound) have the potential of being converted into mobilizing collective experiences and of being narrated as 'national allegory.' (157-158)

If the South African Apartheid system and the American oppression system are to be compared and contrasted, it can be concluded that they are much more similar to each other than they are different from each other. On the basis of their similarity, it can be said that both the American segregation system and the South African Apartheid system "strove to block, in the most fundamental ways, the emergence of a broader imagined community" (Barnard 157). Oppression and segregation in America, like Apartheid in South Africa, "worked, in its everyday banality, by regulating the mobility of black Americans, and by making it difficult for the beneficiaries of the system (the whites) to shape the lives and dwelling places of other people who share their territorial boundaries" (Barnard 157). Tapping from Barnard's opinion, it can be said that, with oppression and segregation in America, those who rule prevent blacks and whites from getting into contact with one another and from forming 'one' nation. In truth, history informs us of how much the implementation of segregation in America as a policy of separation resulted, first, in the prohibition against Blacks, allegedly displayed as being susceptible to doing harm to white people, to have access to the white part of towns, and second, in the fact that whites, conversely made mistrustful to get into contact with blacks (Green, 1936), kept the latter at arm length. The afore described relation is referred to as "geography of oppression," (Barnard, 157) which this article coins as geographical oppression.

In concrete case as it were, Bigger's enforced movements from the black ghetto to the Daltons', first, and to prison, second, will give Bigger, on one hand, and the Daltons, Jane, and Max, on the other, the opportunity to discover each other and imagine a "broader community beyond the restrictive boundaries," that is, the material limitations generated by 'geographical oppression,' (which will next time be shorten

as geo-oppression). On that basis, this study posits that, in the context of Wright's *Native Son*, the Daltons' home, Bigger's prison, and other micro-settings are "Speaking Places," for they serve as meeting places where, first, debates about life issues take place, and second, a broader sense of human kind and a broader imagined community beyond the material limitations of the white neighborhood and the black ghetto are experienced. In addition, these micro-settings give Wright's respective characters the opportunity to shape the lives and dwelling places of other people within the same territorial boundaries with them, and serve as places where the "conception of an interracial community will dawn" (Barnard 158). From that perspective, it can be said that, by naming his character, Mr Green, after Victor Hugo Green (1936), the author of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, the book that informs the Negro about places where they could go and places where they should not go, Wright might aim at giving the male negroes a green light to move to any place they want. Thus, Wright opens America up to negroes as well. By opening those micro-settings up, Wright might aim at having both 'races' concerned with the need to form one only nation. By having some of the characters in *Native Son* conceive a mental and virtual picture of the nation, Wright might anticipate the concept of "imaginative construction of a new national map; a mediation between confinement and the giant journey to liberation" (Barnard 158). Actually, in consideration of the intrusion of Mary into Bigger's job interview, and the ideas she brings therein ( N. S. 57-58-59) on the one hand, of the discussions between Mary, Jane Erlone, and Bigger at various 'micro spaces' in the novel ( N. S. 79-80-81-82-83-84-85) on the other, this paper concludes, like Barnard does about Cronin's prison poems, that, in *Native Son*, Wright "represents the struggle (of liberation) as an opening up of those spaces, an effort to turn those 'micro spaces' into parliaments, places of debates" (Barnard 159). In the context of *Native Son* indeed, as it were, Wright opens up new 'micro spaces,' such as the Daltons' home, and turns them into parliaments, places where issues related to universal human rights, interracial relations, and others are debated on for the betterment of the living conditions of all Americans, regardless their religion, their skin-color, their political opinion, and their ethny. Thus, it can be argued that, before Ingrid Jonker (1965), in her poem "The Child Who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers in Nyanga", Mtutuzeli Matshoba (1979), in his narrative "Pilgrimage to the

Island of Makana”, Jeremy Cronin (1983), in his collection of poems “Inside Out”, and Frederic Jameson (1983), in his “Third World” carried the political project of the “imaginative construction of a new national map : a mediation between confinement and the giant’s journey to liberation or a mediation between prison and the imagined totality of national territory” (Barnard 158), Wright had already carried a similar project out in 1940.

### Conclusion

This article has retraced how Wright has Bigger dislike the white neighborhood first, how he lures Bigger into burning for the same white neighborhood second, and how Wright has an interracial nation constructed third. In search for answers to these questions, this study has discovered the following: first, to have Bigger dislike the white neighborhood, Wright has him have dialogue with the ‘real’ white America, which allows him to ‘present’ (show something as it naturally is) the white man as a dangerous fellow to Bigger. Second, and contrary to the first experience, Wright has Bigger burn for the white neighborhood, by making Bigger have a dialogue with the ‘virtual’ white neighborhood, which allows him to ‘represent’ (show the distorted appearance of something) the white man as a good fellow to the black man. Third, through the distorted representation of the white characters, Wright has constructed an imagined interracial nation. The literary objectives of Wright’s strategy are: first, to show that when people feel uncomfortable in a given environment, the blame is not only on the physical environment, but also and mainly on the moral environment, that is, the cultural values of the inhabitants of the said environment. Second, the knowledge gotten of a place based on virtual means like soap operas, movies, or films, is not as reliable as to constitute the foundation of our migration or commuting plans, lest it may misguide us. Third, enforced movements through the territories of a country help annihilate ethnical and tribal resentments for they allow the ones to share experiences, cultural values, and other social realities with the others.

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