

The Spot In the Mirror: The Role of Gender in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*

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*Wright undermines his own profundity by denigrating the “Negro” woman in his autobiography *Black Boy*. As Wright moves from child to man his mother literally and figuratively moves from agency to the shadows of his life. In part two his opposition towards racism becomes heavily gendered: the author portrays the deterioration of his relationship with the communist party through the verbal threats of a “huge, fat” Black woman and unknowingly implicates himself in the plight of poor Black women. What’s at stake is the author himself—as a critic, but especially as an agitator against racism.*

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The very popular African-American rap star Shawn Carter, also known as Jay-Z, will most likely go down in history as one of the best musicians of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His accolades are numerous as well as the records he’s broken in sales. His music and, in particular, his lyrics are what he’s most known and respected for – for his portrayals of black life as he sees it. Carter has managed to tap into an everyday grittiness that taints the lives of millions in the urban, Black community.

One song in particular, “99 Problems,” is a well-produced and well-written story of an urban, working-class Black male life (Jay-Z, 2004, track 9). The language of rap is known for its duality and Carter follows suit here. To portray how hard he struggles for success in the world Carter (as Jay-Z) portrays social, fun things such as romance as something he just cannot afford or fit into his conflict-riddled life. Nor does it seem that he would want to if given the chance—the word he uses to capture love and companionship is “bitch” (Jay-Z, 2004, track 9). Carter illuminates racial injustice and police corruption by what they are not—a woman, someone or something apparently too trivial to take seriously.

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Despite some popular notions to the contrary, neither Shawn Carter nor other rap stars invented the use of the feminine as a mirror of personal and social ills or, in this case, as a mirror to the Black man's plight. This has been an American tradition for most of our literary and artistic narratives, those white and Black, and usually male. Richard Wright, the famed Black writer of the 1940s is no exception. In 1940 he received critical acclaim for his novel *Native Son* and, later, for his autobiography *Black Boy* in 1945. Both texts were praised for their truthful renderings of African-American life in Jim Crow America. In his 1993 introduction to *Black Boy*, Ward called it "a book that nicely blended the meaning, the challenge, and the significance of being Southern, Black, and male" (p. xi). Yet, the lyrics of a talented rap star and the literature of a talented writer, while so far apart in style, genre, and intention, turn out to be two sides of the same gendered coin.

A larger recurring statement about manhood lies underneath the surface of most of our popular cultural language today whether women are directly or indirectly mentioned. The final lyric of "99 Problems" changes its word order and Jay-Z (2004) states that *being* a bitch is not an option for him in his "hard-knock" life (track 9). His closing line reveals that it is not "women problems" he cannot afford, it is being weak, a "bitch," that he must not risk (track 9). Both layers of the song share the female, or the feminine, as its foundation. Again, the protagonist uses the feminine as a mirror in which to consider himself: not only can the artist not afford women in his life, he cannot afford to *be* like one either.

Why does this matter regarding Richard Wright and his autobiography *Black Boy*? Nearly sixty years before Shawn Carter wrote out his manhood on the body of the woman in explicitly degrading terms Wright achieved the same when telling the story of his own manhood in subtler, though still disturbing, language. I am not suggesting that misogyny is any type of Black literary tradition, no more or less than it is in the broader American literary canon. In fact, I argue that the subjection of women is such an intrinsic part of the overarching societal structure that contains us that even its agitators cannot escape it in their own seemingly resistant language. Where both artists Carter and Wright attempt to resist their oppression through clever and subversive language they instead still perpetuate oppressive forces through their use of the feminine thus bolstering the very rigidly racist structure they intend to dismantle. In the end, the racist structures these men exist in are not weakened but *strengthened* when its own victims incorporate it into their own language and acts. Despite the convincing critiques *Black Boy* offers regarding the racist hypocrisy of the North and the brutal Jim Crow South, Richard Wright's ultimate attack on American racism fails as true resistance.

An autobiography poses some unique and tricky issues for the reader. Do we hold the author more or less responsible for his story's themes? How much of the narrative is truth and how much is the author making up as myth or fiction? Richard Wright's very act of *writing* down his "life" means there's some self-mythologizing occurring—the author still chooses what to keep, what to omit, what to exaggerate in order to convey his character. That self does not have to be whole or who he would actually say he were in reality but nonetheless there is a self, a "personality" that the author provides us to read.

In his book *On Autobiography*, Lejeune (1989) defines the genre as “the story of [the author’s] personality” and I believe this to be the best way to read *Black Boy* (p. 5). For a personality is never finished, there’s no final chapter. *Black Boy* fits much of Lejeune’s specific criteria including the situation of the author where the author and the narrator are identical; Lejeune also demands “[t]he subject must be *primarily* individual life, the genesis of the personality; but the chronicle and social or political history can also be part of the narrative” (p. 5). We know that the author and the narrator are the same by their shared use of the name “Richard” plus the narrator’s mention of writing “Big Boy Leaves Home” which Wright first published in 1936; the narrator’s personal growth and struggles set within the larger context of Jim Crow racism fit *Black Boy* in Lejeune’s social criteria, as well.

Using the self as a symbol for larger issues runs the risk of unintended self-revelation. We will see that the genesis of the narrator’s consciousness occurs at the locus of the feminine within an unconsciously shared space with racism’s misogyny. I argue that this genesis of Wright’s narrator is not one of rebellion and resistance, but it is the birth of *Wright’s* ambivalence and resentment as well as that of Richard’s—it is the story of a failed resistance at the hands of gender’s silent presence.

The delineation of resistance that earned *Black Boy* praise ultimately collapses into itself through the holes of gender. Wright’s autobiographical narrator, whom I will refer to as “Richard” from this point on, brilliantly reflects the racist oppression he lives in so as to flip and nullify it for his own desperate liberation; but his narrative is unfortunately repeatedly interrupted with the broken, fragile, threatening, demeaned or demeaning Black woman. Though Richard offers himself up as a mirror to Jim Crow in order to judge and condemn it to his larger white audience the women in his life serve as clearer mirrors in which he negatively views himself. Never are the women to have their own agency in the same way Richard gets to fight for and eventually gain. Often nameless, the women in *Black Boy* are tragic in their repressive positions of subjugation.

For example, after describing a particularly traumatic experience in his new job as a busboy at a white hotel Richard, the narrator, pauses to step out of his tale and offer a critique of America as both narrator and as the author, Richard Wright. He notes:

I know that not race alone, not color alone, but the daily values that give meaning to life stood between me and those white girls with whom I worked. Their constant outward-looking...made them dream and fix their eyes upon the trash of life, made it impossible for them to learn a language which could have taught them to speak of what was in their or others’ hearts. The words of their souls were the syllables of popular songs. (Wright, 1945, p. 273)

In his own critique he uses women—in this case, white women—as an example of American emptiness. Richard’s stepping out of his narrative to give this parenthetical critique implies that the *author* Richard Wright is speaking to us, the readers. And, the implied “I” in this pause also points to a “you”—the reader. This conversational detail again fits Lejeune’s (1989) definition for autobiography. For my purposes in this paper, what both “Richard” and Richard Wright choose to talk about directly to the reader points to a deep-seated sexism rather than an embedded, resented anti-racism. Richard

frequently ignores the plight of black women or assumes their oppression as a given reality similar to his own, but not worthy of critical examination.

In the first opening paragraph of *Black Boy*, four-year-old Richard (1945) presents his mother and grandmother as distant and frightening. He recalls:

All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to *keep still* [emphasis added], warning me that I *must make no noise* [emphasis added]. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient...I was dreaming of running and playing and shouting, but the vivid image of Granny's old, white, wrinkled, grim face...made me afraid. (p. 3)

Thus, from our very first introduction to *Black Boy*'s Richard he's presented as the creative gem stifled and held back by his female authority figures. Despite Wright's autobiographical intention to reveal and battle racism, his narrative begins first with his immediate abuse at the hands of black women not of whites. Richard's early self-image, at least that presented to the reader, comes from his mother, his grandmother, and his Aunt Addie—who arrives after his mother falls ill and was especially abusive to Richard—all black women, not the whites Wright comes to implicate later. Aunt Addie beats him as a child and terrorizes him so badly in school that he develops a lifelong fear of public speaking; his grandmother repeatedly battles his budding secularism and literary imagination; and his mother fails him most of all—once his go-to for all of his questions, her mysterious illness takes his mother away from him. Also, her illness conveniently coincides with one of his first Jim Crow experiences. Richard relays:

“Why are they taking mama that way?” I asked Uncle Edward.
“There are no hospital facilities for colored, and this is the way we have to do it,” he said. I watched the men take the stretcher down the steps; then I stood on the sidewalk and watched them lift my mother into the ambulance and drive away. I knew that my mother had gone out of my life; I could feel it. (Wright, 1945, p. 99)

In the second half of *Black Boy* Richard's emotions are more problematic. Finally escaping the south he first arrives in Chicago's South Side and finds a room to rent in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ross, where a disturbing passage promptly follows. Mrs. Ross's daughter, Bess, is an attractive young woman of seventeen years who reads on a fifth grade level and immediately “loves” Richard upon meeting him. He experiences many conflicting emotions towards her ranging from disgust to sexual desire:

What could I do with a girl like this? [emphasis added] Was I dumb or was she dumb?... Could I ever talk to her about what I felt, hoped? Could she ever understand my life?...But I knew that such questions did not bother her.... I kissed and petted her. She was warm, eager, *childish, pliable* [emphasis added].... I disengaged my hand from hers. I looked at her and wanted either to laugh or to slap her. (Wright, 1945, pp. 217-219)

Even when Richard directly involves himself with a black woman or is, at least, privy to her own violent experience, as we will see, he never pauses to fully consider her as a fellow victim or companion in the struggle against discrimination; instead, her experiences return us to his fear. In fact, the one time Richard does pause to note the

economic plight of black women he blatantly sidesteps his own implication in their exploitation:

I hungered for relief and, as a salesman of insurance to many young black *girls*, I found it [emphasis added]. There were many comely black housewives who, trying *desperately* to keep up their insurance payments, were willing to make bargains *to escape* paying a ten-cent premium. I had a long, tortured affair with one girl by paying her ten-cent premium each week. She was an illiterate black *child* [emphasis added] with a baby whose father she did not know. (Wright, 1945, p. 289)

Not only is Richard's lover nameless, her description is that of a child whose significance in the world he finds to be meaningless. Then not one page later the author continues Richard's description of life as an insurance agent and pauses to note the particular struggles of black women again:

That was the way the black women were regarded by the black agents...[The agents] would insist upon [sex], using the claim money as a bribe. If the woman refused, they would report to the office that the woman was a malingerer. The average black woman would submit because she needed the money badly. (Wright, 1945, p. 293)

Richard never explicitly implicates his role as a collector as part of these women's exploitation despite his own "relationship" with one of them.

What matters here is that in the 384 pages of the text the only two references Richard Wright makes to his narrator's sexuality involve women who are infantile, useless, and barely plausible as real people. Most importantly, both women gesture to the narrator's own self-consciousness, revealed by his urges to harm the women. Richard voices his frustration at his client-slash-lover's mindless nature:

"Can't you really read?" I asked.

"Naw," she giggled. "You know I can't read."...

"You all right," she said, giggling. "I like you."

"I could kill you," I said ... [emphasis added]

"You crazy, man," she said.

"Maybe I am," I muttered, angry that I was sitting beside a human being to whom I could not talk. (Wright, 1945, p. 290)

It is not just a matter of *ignoring* women, or, rather, excluding women in this critical attack on racism in America; Wright simultaneously and paradoxically glosses over women while perpetuating their subjugation. Worse, the value, or lack thereof, Richard determines for these woman seems to warrant a mortal violence.

In his essay *Negating the Negation as a Form of Affirmation in Minority Discourse*, JanMohamed argues (1995) that Wright negates racism's negation in order to

affirm his own human existence. If racism is about stripping one of his humanity and selfhood, Wright must invalidate this attack to both illuminate the racist structure for what it is and, thus, to resist it. His own title *Black Boy* introduces this negation-turned-affirmation by flipping the common degrading “boy” reference to black men into a reclaiming of his own identity and narrative.

Strangely enough, for JanMohamed’s (1995) argument to work he himself must ignore the misogyny in Wright’s text. He never directly discusses the women in *Black Boy*, save one passage on Richard’s sick mother and there he cites her illness as yet another reflection of *Richard’s* suffering. Richard’s first job while in the South involved witnessing a gruesome attack on a black female client of his boss and the boss’s son. But, when he discusses this job—one of the moments when Richard faces his negation at the hands of white employers—JanMohamed completely omits the brutal attack. In *Black Boy* Richard (1945) recalls:

One morning...the boss and his son drove up in their car. A frightened black woman sat between them. They got out and half dragged and half kicked the woman into the store. White people passed and looked on without expression. A white policeman watched from the corner, twirling his night stick: but he made no move. I watched out of the corner of my eyes, but *I never slackened the strokes of my chamois upon the brass* [emphasis added]...I heard shrill screams coming from the rear room of the store; later the woman stumbled out, bleeding, crying, holding her stomach, her clothing torn...the policeman met her, grabbed her, accused her of being drunk, called a patrol wagon and carted her away. When I went to the rear of the store, the boss and his son were washing their hands at the sink...the floor was bloody, strewn with wisps of hair and clothing....“Boy, that’s what we do to niggers when they don’t pay their bills.” (p. 179-180)

In his essay all JanMohamed (1995) has to say about this episode is that, “[Wright] soon becomes a victim of casual violence intended to teach him ‘his place,’ and, most dishearteningly for him, he finds his ambitions crushed by the threat of violence” (p. 114-115). JanMohamed uses the woman’s brutalization as a sign of *Richard’s* threatened liberation. And Richard Wright completely overlooks his own subject’s frozen physiological state during this attack. This is what I argue is the leveling and conflating of race with gender, or, perhaps, racism with sexism. Yet Wright cannot or chooses not to see this collapsing despite his own story’s striking examples.

Later, JanMohamed (1995) argues:

For [the author] to understand thoroughly the system and the effects of racial oppression and to bring them to the light of full consciousness, he has to be entirely open to the system, he has to internalize it fully while maintaining a space within his mind that remains uncontaminated by the racist ideology—he has to retain a vantage point from which he can observe, critique, and oppose white ascendancy. (p. 118)

But is it possible to “internalize it fully” whilst retaining a “vantage point”? I would argue that the process of internalizing anything, especially something so large as the system of repressions, requires a residue left with the resister.

In the essay *One is Not Born a Woman*, feminist theorist Wittig (2001) posits that one cannot use the language of the oppressor to speak for the oppressed and thusly there is a stepping *out of* rather than a leaping *into* that could truly attack the oppressive structures in place. Nodding to cultural critic bell hooks (1995) Wright's *Black Boy* absolutely exists in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Patriarchy is crucial to our understanding Richard's failure to critique or even to escape his racist origins. We have to look at the subjugation of women as another dimension of racism's architecture. So to challenge it requires an abandonment of all its dimensions, or the challenge fails and merely folds in on itself.

Richard's early experiences with women closest to him collectively shape his notions of self. So it is no surprise that the author writes black women as attending the worst moments of his life. Jaques Lacan's (1949/2001) psychoanalytic approach, "The Mirror Stage," helps us to see the author's projection of both fear and anger onto the women around him. Returning to his two "romantic interests" Richard internalizes the women's characters as negative reflections on his own:

I had never dreamed that anyone [e.g. Bess] would accept me so simply, so completely, without question or the least hint of personal aggrandizement. The truth was that I had—even though I had fought against it—grown to accept the value of myself that my old environment had created in me. (Wright, 1945, p. 219)

And again with the illiterate insurance client:

I stared at her and wondered just what a life like hers meant in the scheme of things, and I came to the conclusion that it meant absolutely nothing. *And neither did my life mean anything* [emphasis added]. (Wright, 1945, p. 290).

Richard is critically aware of the oppression that binds him. But he never seems to see the role of women nor their battles with racism that, by the very definition of their bodies, inherently involves sexism. Richard fails to see this parallel as partnered with the same oppressive environment from which he's running. Rather, this is the continuum of white patriarchy that he takes as natural, and perhaps this stems from his negatively identifying with women at an early age. We have seen from the author's own opening lines that he experienced harm at the hands of his female caretakers *before* facing discrimination. Indeed, his mother unintentionally introduces her son to racism when she's carted away. Paradoxically, such a blind spot ultimately holds down Richard and his author, still trapped in their original oppressive spaces. JanMohamed (1995) concludes his essay with the idea that "*Black Boy* is remarkable not so much for its rebellion as for the control that Wright had to exercise and the internal struggle that he had to wage against being engulfed by the racist sovereignty" (p. 118).

This control is actually incomplete and a repressive discipline achieved at the expense of the feminine. This "control" for which Richard Wright is praised is the same discipline Jay-Z (2004) raps about in "99 Problems" (track 9). That is ultimately the deadly beauty of oppression—that even when admiring his liberated reflection the resister's still trapped in oppression's house. Whether through speaking protest, rapping it, or writing it, there is still the shadow in the corner, a smudge in the ink, keeping one's

reflection from completion. And those resisting are left puzzled scratching at the spot on the mirror.

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