



SEE NO EVIL: THE (IN)CARCERAL IMAGINATION

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See No Evil: The (In)Carceral Imagination

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Introduction

“One of the first signs of the beginning of understanding is the wish to die. This life appears unbearable, another unattainable. One is no longer ashamed of wanting to die; one asks to be moved from the old cell, which one hates, to a new one, which one will only in time come to hate. In this there is also a residue of belief that during the move the master will chance to come along the corridor, look at the prisoner and say: ‘This man is not to be locked up again, He is to come with me.’”

-Franz Kafka, *Zurau Aphorisms*

“I like to think I know what death is. I like to think that it’s something I could look at straight” begins the lines of Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing Unburied, Sing* (1). Posing ostensibly as an uncomplicated meditation on death, in dialogue with John Edgar Wideman’s analysis of prison as “hard time, a metaphorical death, a sustained twilight condition of death-in-life,” Ward’s character’s reflections encapsulate the ubiquity of the USAmerican prison system (*Brothers and Keepers*, 35). Prison, whether one is in it or vice-versa, accommodates a form of psychic death, a mental loss of self-identity. Ward’s connection of metaphorical death in prison reflects Franz Kafka’s musing on human development. Derived from his book *The Zurau Aphorisms*, maps out a connection between prison and the desire to die. This concept becomes a recurrent complicated theme in the hands of African American writers applying it to the United States’ criminal justice system and the communities that persist in its shadows. The wish to die evolves as an extreme and even psychologically fantastical parable of the carceral imagination. This pair’s connection to the epigraph illustrates the omnipresent prison’s consignment of prisoners to an all-encompassing social death. My project studies Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Ward’s *Sing, Unburied Sing* (2017), and Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers* (1984) to consider how these authors represent the carceral forcefield spreading over black communities in the wake of a contemporary world wherein African Americans dominate United States prisons.

Presently, the United States continues to lead the world in the rate at which it incarcerates its people. For the African American writers I discuss, the historical legacies of slavery manifest themselves through the 20th and 21st century practices of mass incarceration. That is to say, the abolition of slavery incorporated an interesting caveat to social relations: The Thirteenth Amendment. While the Thirteenth Amendment was the plenary vehicle by which to dissolve and eradicate slavery, much that was prohibited by the illegalization of slavery remained permissible for individuals “duly” convicted of crimes and incarcerated. During the 19th century Reconstruction period, the South availed itself of this legislative loophole in rapidly expanding the criminalization of black behaviors, and even the revitalization of their economy profited from creating policies that would disproportionately target African Americans and ultimately locate them within prisons. In considering multifaceted pathways of social and systemic oppression of African Americans through prisons, these writers explore and interrogate the nature of penal institutions by identifying the psychopathological impacts with which prisons mentally destabilize and debilitate their prisoners as well as how that process affected in varying ways the totality of black American communities and the psychologies of the individuals within them.

Because my project connects the legacies of slavery and racial caste systems to the contemporary reality of mass incarceration, I focus on the criminalization of black males rather than the entirety of people of color, although immigration policy influences some Latinx writers while numerous Asian American writers have chosen to write on the reverberations of the Japanese internment camps. Black men constitute the highest population of mass incarceration (although black women are also incarcerated at similarly disproportionate rates) and, thus, the focus of community most frequently inhabiting the spaces I wish to address, although black

women who experience the secondary effects of this incarcerating system are also crucial to my literary exploration.

Throughout this project, I investigate the following texts to illustrate the representations of prisons as debilitating spaces in their present state: Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, John Edgar Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*. I turn to narrative (novel and memoir) to exemplify the particularity of human experiences and (un)intended consequences as they are shaped by carceral realities, as these works examine identity formation as a dialogue between individual propensities and experiences, both chosen and imposed. *Native Son* is a novel focusing on a protagonist from the inner city of Chicago who fails to individuate white people and perceive whiteness as a monolithic entity in a toxic environment that punishes his positionality. The narrative reflects the social conditions contributing to the racial divide in the early twentieth century. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a novel primarily centered around modern family dynamics in a small town in Mississippi as they visit a penitentiary. Ward's novel is in dialogue with *Native Son* as it interrogates the continuity of generational oppression that maneuvers across chronological and geographical boundaries. The next and final story is a memoir, which helps fluidly immerse the audience in the lived experience of others, and particularly the experience of prison *Brothers and Keepers* revolves around two brothers from Pittsburgh and encapsulates the psychological responses to systematic oppression through the narrator, whose brother lives encumbered by a life sentence.

The texts, written during different decades and focusing on different areas, each serve important roles representing the complicity of spaces in disenfranchising African American males in different stages of life. More specifically, however, I use these texts as moments of resistance to carceral structures, moments which reinforce the disproportionality and bias

inflicted by spaces. Despite the veritable omnipresence of these structures in society, people often respond to them resistantly, whether consciously or unconsciously. Insanity is defined as the process of repeating an activity multiple times with the expectation to yield different results. Let these characters testify to the insanity that embeds the structure of the criminal justice system.

During the 20th century, the southern ways of the 19th century found transformed expression in the working-class north for many black communities. The draft for both World War I and World War II created a significant shortage of jobs due to the immense number of people removed from the factories. A desperate need for additional labor over war production catalyzed the Great Migration, which transpired in the form of hundreds of thousands of African Americans travelling from the rural South to the North in search of economic and individual prosperity that was not afforded to them in the Jim Crow South. These urban settings proved more hopeless in decades to come, however, as industrialization rapidly curtailed in tandem with a disturbing increase in the unemployment rate by the 1980s due to massive job loss.

Victor Rios's urban ethnographic study *Punished* postulates that these issues are products of omnipresent racialized social control, which scholars have modernly defined as the overlapping processes by which populations are regulated and repressed.¹ The world's push towards globalized interdependence perpetuates neoliberalism, an economic philosophy characterized by the endorsement of laissez-faire principles of free market trade, deregulation of the government, and a paradigmatic shift away from the Keynesian New Deal policies of the 1940s. Such an expansion of a transnational global economy deteriorates marginalized communities through systematic exploitation of state welfare. Neoliberalism produces and

¹ Victor Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, 30

reproduces marginalized communities by depriving them of economic resources while simultaneously reinforcing punitive social policies. Therefore, the development of the carceral state in the vein of neoliberalism manifests itself through numerous social programs functioning within impoverished urban communities, programs which enforce unwarranted supervision and surveillance on the people who inhabit those communities.

Criminologists and other scholars have contested the efficacy of the U.S. criminal justice system and its impacts on people of color. In response to the rise in crime and unemployment, governments began to endorse a “tough on crime” ideology structured to expand the criminal justice system into a mechanism for hyper-criminalization. In the middle of the 1960s Civil Rights era, President Lyndon Johnson initiates the War on Crime as a complementary initiative cultivating his Great Society, which in turn sought putatively to discover and combat the sources of poverty plaguing the country. These “tough on crime” policies culminated in Nixon’s infamous “War on Drugs” program, perhaps the most ruthless indication of America’s transition to a more intolerant approach to systematic control of populations through the rise in incarceration.

The disciplinary ideology exists in the structure of in-school discipline, which majorly contributes to contemporary mass incarceration through the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline works negatively as a system of policies that tracks certain groups into certain negative futures by reducing them to specimens who are unable to think for themselves. It becomes a further pressure, another obstacle to black boys’ right to gain the fruitful benefits of education. The stringency of these policies functions most successfully in preparing black boys for carceral realities, irrevocably transforming their identities into that of criminals that must be perpetually monitored, repressed, and sanctioned at any action signifying a divergence from the

established rules of the school. Establishing a chronology helps to elucidate the trajectory of punitive social strategies perpetuating the marginalization of minority communities by selective racializing criminality. Through infrastructure and discipline, the transformation of education becomes a mechanism of social sorting, credentialing, and job training.

Despite holding 5% of the world's population, the United States houses 25% of the world's population, with 13% of this comprised of African Americans. A prison is a building in which people are legally held as a punishment for a crime they have committed or while awaiting trial. Prisons are impermanent houses for the detained, embodiments of containment with potentially permanent effects. My project does not seek to homogenize the lived experience of prisoners within carceral settings. That is, it intends not to rely in any way on the implication that all inmates suffer from the same circumstances nor to suggest that the psychological impacts of prison are universal to all, for it recognizes that humanity is a subjective experience that cannot be empirically reflected to suggest blank uniformity. I do, however, wish to pinpoint significant punitive elements indicative of the prison experience itself, the implications of which encapsulate the effects of social incapacitation. Dismissing such an abundance of devastating evidence risks rendering invisible the transgressive consequences inflicted upon a marginalized population, perhaps because of their positionality. A prolonged stay within prison undoubtedly increases the chance by which an inmate might experience long-term consequences, consciously and unconsciously. Moreover, psychologists and researchers have supported the argument that an environment's conduciveness to extreme psychological turmoil can directly correlate to a higher number of people who suffer the traumatic consequences of those conditions. While inmates cope with prison life in disparate ways, the architecture and systematic policies suggests an absence of an intent or desire to facilitate the smooth return of said individuals to society as

dignified, productive citizens. Prison life, despite its subjectivity, necessitates survival, adjustments, and adaptation to unnatural and likely subpar living conditions absent from general society.

My project situates the effects of hyper-criminalization in two areas: depersonalization and dehumanization. These areas transpire not in gradations of one another but as coexisting elements within different institutions. Similar to how the identities of young black boys have been compromised, distorted, and weaponized within the state, such images of tolerance often materialize within the prison. Institutionalization, sometimes described as “prisonization,” exists as a reification of social incapacitation of prisoners, one of the most recognized examples of prison’s debilitating consequences. It is a state of vulnerability to external pressures that has catalyzed an internalization of institutional pressures, the latter of which is caused by over-exposure to a confining environment. Copious concentrations of historical and historiographical research consciously illuminate the disparities between the social mechanisms incorporated within the infrastructure of incarceration and the realities of the subjects. My project reproduces societal images of tolerance by placing them within the confines of penal institutions. More specifically, literary works index use symbolism to map different internal states of mind, thereby placing attention on individuals, ultimately providing an empathetic access to readers that statistical models do not achieve nor reflect.

Philosopher Michel Foucault historicizes the prison into two categories: the old prison and the modern penitentiary. Separating their identities by appearance and function further emphasizes their inherent contrasts. Historically, the “old prison” served as a facility in which accused persons would remain in custody; whereas, the penitentiary contained the convicted criminals. The dichotomy exists such that prisons were seen to be more accessible to the general

public while penitentiaries reflected a distinct sense of otherness in the segregation of inmates. Monika Fludernik elaborates on this distinction in elucidating the experience of time characterized by the penitentiary. The modern penitentiary works to manipulate and conflate the temporal experience, distorting valuable time into worthless currency. Time, consequently, becomes nothing short of a quotidian encumbrance, slowing down inasmuch as each day feels like an eternity. Time becomes an instrument by which to dissolve the identity of prisoners, slowing increasing their dependence on those who control it.

I identify explore depersonalization as one stage of prison as it pertains to the immediate perceptual experiences and realities of the inmates. In their article “Adaptation to Prison and Inmate Self-Concept,” Psychologists Brent Paterline and Douglas Orr emphasized the importance of delineating the identities of prisoners entering prison. Inmates, by their positionality, have already experienced depersonalization at the hands of a legal system. Despite their backgrounds, inmates all converge upon this space with a unique identity, an independent personality shaped by their lived experiences prior to detainment. Despite their disenfranchisement, prisoners retain a unique individuality that distinguishes them from each another, one of the last extant relics of their humanity that is imperiled upon their entrance into this destabilizing space. Nothing gold can stay.

Depersonalization is a dissociative disorder consisting of a detachment of the self, whether mind or body, that disturbs the ability of one to process, absorb, and synthesize the present. It constitutes a feeling of unreality that desensitizes the individual from their environment, a process known as derealization. To depersonalize is to divest an individual of human characteristics, to render them devoid of the individuality that is intrinsic to their identity. Prisons, through a variety of characteristics and constitutive elements, create depersonalizing

environments on the inmates, causing them to confuse their conceptions of self as they grapple with the arduous process of acclimating to confinement and restraint. Before stripping someone of humanity, prisons debilitate and eradicate personhood in order to minimize inmates within a homogenous state of equilibrium.

The scene of arrival, in many guises, is classic for the novel. It is overlaid with dread, not just the fear of others but of self, when the destination is prison. Upon arrival, you are required to surrender all of your belongings, to relinquish your clothes, and to replace them with one uniform jumpsuit identical to the other inmates. One is assigned a number corresponding to their person and eventually assigned a corresponding cell, to which they are directed for safekeeping, a line of demarcation that impedes movement. In that instance, depersonalization has been enacted and solidified within the prison. Pursuant to psychologists Brent Paterline and Douglass Orr, incoming inmates have already experienced some degree of depersonalization at the hands of a culpable legal system through exclusion and ubiquitous stigmatization. This exacerbates when coupled with social incapacitation that extensive sentences entail, all of which project deleterious effects on the self-concept and self-efficacy of the prisoner. Self-concept encompasses an idea of the self that is constructed from the beliefs held by oneself and others; self-efficacy refers to the degree by which individuals can conceptualize themselves as autonomous agents within their immediate environment. Penal institutions thrive on the deprivation of resources afforded to inmates, which diminishes their self-esteem. Depersonalization reduces the avenues of agency and autonomy, thereby denying inmates the ability to envision themselves as active participants in their own realities. This deprivation is one of the central causes of institutionalization, in which the negative psychological aspects of imprisonment enforce a mental dissolution of the prisoner.

I explore dehumanization as the next stage of deterioration for the inmate because it focuses more explicitly on the conditions of confinement. Dehumanization refers to the denial of humanity of a person or group of people. It encompasses a process of viewing, treating, and interacting with others as though they lack mental capacities that all human beings possess. I refer to imprisonment in terms of a state-run facility. Fludernik asserts that, semantically, the most basic feature of confinement targets restraint, specifically impinging one's autonomous physical movement. Such conditions impair the motor skills of the subject, nullifying any attempts to act in self-defense and also to abscond. Another central mechanism of imprisonment is the imposition of enclosed spaces, thereby setting extreme boundaries to fully inhibit the prisoner's escape. Together, the two constituents negate physical locomotion, ultimately usurping the prisoner's independence. Thus, the independence converts to dependence on the prisoner's captors-the prison guards-who set the boundaries and prescribe what the prisoner can and cannot do. The subject experiences an unlimited subjection to the rules of the institution, coerced by the penal system and its instruments to comport oneself in a certain way. Characterizing the conditions of confinement in a way identical to captivity signifies the image with which penal institutions portray prisoners, especially since almost plenary authority is devolved to prison officials in carrying out the tasks over the inmates.

Besides the curtailment of physical movement, prisons inflict dehumanizing treatment in other ways. Even within prison, there exist a myriad of taxonomies corresponding to inmates regarding their subjective positionalities within the prison, specifically those of maximum security. Individuals are divided based on the degree to which they pose a threat to the environment. General population, a.k.a. "gen pop," is the area of prison that houses the majority of inmates. It is the setting where prisoners can most freely coexist and navigate their

confinement, perhaps the most visible privilege. These accommodations are not uncircumscribed, however, as they can be revoked at any time depending on a prisoner's decision to deviate from the established set of rules. Taxonomies denote the increasing levels by which prisoners are monitored and restricted in different units.

Ultimately, each of my selected texts analyzes the carceral imagination as a psychic disposition shaped for blackness, reflecting a social imagination of black men as situated already within prison. Thus, the works engage with carceral realities that confine the lives of black males throughout the United States from Jim Crow to the era of mass incarceration. As I progress through the dual reality of depersonalization and dehumanization, the texts depict these thresholds along the parameters of the subjects within them, implicitly assessing black masculinity through hyper-criminalization. In this carceral imagination, social spaces make black identities elastic, always subject to change. To see is not to see.

Chapter I: Outskirted

Carceral imagination commences well before black boys and men enter the space of prison. It is an imaginary status yet a recreated reality constantly projected and instilled, whether it functions as a looming background force or an imminent course of action. Hyper-criminalization entails a sort of repetition, an everydayness that identifies and treats black movements as wrong and transgressive. Richard Wright's *Native Son* elucidates the feeling of hyper-criminalization, the transformation of normal actions into deviant malicious behaviors, as it presages and begets a series of unintended consequences. It is through these unforeseen events that Wright unearths the correlation between the racialization of behaviors and the criminalization as a necessary corollary to both one's refusal and decision to conform to them.

Wright's *Native Sons* focuses on a twenty-year old African American named Bigger Thomas who lives in an impoverished neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. Bigger wanders amidst the societal terrain without a conscious effort to make sense of his conditions and surroundings. The opening scene inaugurates suspense and violence as it simultaneously exposes the economic conditions of numerous African Americans forced to live in unsustainable poverty:

“There he is again, Bigger!” The woman screamed, and the tiny, one-room apartment galvanized into violent action. A chair toppled as the woman, half-dressed and in her stocking feet, scrambled breathlessly upon the bed. Her two sons, barefoot, stood tense and motionless, their eyes searching anxiously under the bed and chairs. The girl ran into a corner, half-stooped and gathered the hem of her slip into both of her hands and held it tightly over her knees. (4)

This passage evokes a comical series of interactions between a family, mid-dressing, all of whom sprawl into chaos at the sight of a rat, a rodent infiltrating into a social space. The scene presents its first depiction of space and boundaries. A tiny, one-room apartment houses four separate people such that an incommensurable space instantly induces feelings of discomfort and confinement, a disenfranchising element that delineates the identity and lived experience of Bigger Thomas. The rat manifested itself as social intrusion, a visible representation of the violent, rat-like conditions accommodating its existence, transforming the identity of Bigger's apartment from its façade of an organized domestic space. Along that same vein, the rat mirrors the family's inescapable situation, forced to reconcile with the reality of being trapped while trying to exercise its agency in scurrying across the room. Bigger hurriedly and violently kills the rat with a skillet before it can actually touch the family.

Therefore, what is shown here in this scene is not simply the depiction of an innocuous family interaction but rather the topography of a landscape of subjugation and restriction, a landscape that contains minoritized groups in a space insofar as real social and physical mobility are suppressed. Bigger's struggle with the rat represents, in conjunction with a commentary on space, Wright's earliest metaphor for Bigger's psychological interiority. The repulsive black rat illustrates a clear internal (its alacrity for freedom) and external (size, phenotype) identification with Bigger's alacrity for freedom, thus making the scene an outright recreation of Bigger's confrontation with himself, an image that anticipates his modulations between the position of predator and prey in his outside relationships. These imaginary lines of demarcation hold significant value when assessed against the backdrop of a community harnessing veiled racism, which reduces African Americans to marginal constituents of a classist society. Bigger unconsciously internalizes the meagerness of his circumstances, manifesting his feelings of

inadequacy and deprivation against all of those who cherish and value him. This opening scene grounds Bigger's carceral reality as he projects his interiority onto his environment.

His housing conditions notwithstanding, Bigger begins the narrative having already been presented with a job opportunity by Mr. Henry Dalton, a real estate magnate and patriarch of the wealthy namesake family. Wright embeds these limits ubiquitously throughout all of Bigger's immediate environment. Following the opening scene, for example, Bigger's conversation with his mother reflects the immediacy with which his limitations debilitate his lived experience. Tension increases throughout the dialogue as his mother incessantly comments on his new job, culminating in an anxiety-induced ultimatum spoken by her: "You know Bigger...if you don't take that job the relief'll cut us off. We won't have any food" (12). Bigger's mother essentially reminds him of the ramifications of not taking his new job, a huge burden that exacerbates his current hopelessness upon disrepair. In Bigger begins this novel at the age of 20, on the precipice of adulthood. The carceral state manifests here in the inextricability of welfare: if Bigger chooses not to take this job, he risks cutting off his family aid, forcing him to enter an extra-legal job market to make up the difference.

Bigger's first steps into the street enact the story's first notable instances of free indirect discourse, a narratological mode of discourse in which the author accesses the psychological sentiments of characters, in this case specifically Bigger. As he steps out into the street, Bigger's mind races into thoughts of discontent, dissatisfaction with the current state of his life and no substantive recourse by which to reconcile this situation.

He was sick of his life at home. Day in and day out there was nothing but shouts and bickering. But what could he do? Each time he asked himself that question his mind hit a blank wall and he stopped thinking. Across the street directly in front of him, he saw a

truck pull to a stop at the curb and two white men in overalls got out with pails and brushes. Yes he could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. (12)

The thought of no free choice puts Bigger into an emotional stasis in which we cannot see outside of his living situation. The brief inquiry speaks to Bigger's continuous contemplation of his independence even while he leaves his tiny dwelling.

As if Bigger's own introspection were not already dismal, the topography of Bigger's neighborhood encloses upon him as he confronts the top an advertising poster of a politician running for State's Attorney, inscribed with red letters "YOU CAN'T WIN" (13). Wright's somewhat heavy-handed delivery of Bigger's circumscribed movement elucidates his temperament as he transitions from his confined house to the outside world. Navigation emerges as a primary theme as an inaccessible reality for Bigger. Not only does the reader truly see Bigger's feelings about his job, to which he seems quite indifferent, but the sight of Buckley's poster arrests Bigger's attention insomuch as he feels the message was meant for himself, showing "one of those faces that looked 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" (13). His interaction with the poster sets up one of the many instances of the narrative in which scrutiny defines the environment for different characters. Bigger can not seem to escape the eyes of the poster, making him feel as though the advertising poster communicated its message specifically to him.

Before enlisting his labor as the household's chauffeur, Mr. Dalton facilitates a minor interrogation of Bigger in which he essentially ascertains whether Bigger is a true danger to

society. This seed of reluctant contemplation was harbored by background information gained on Bigger, in which the novel reveals Bigger's earliest interaction with law enforcement. According to his records, the young man had been sent to a reform school several years prior due to allegations that he stole auto tires. Mr. Dalton inquires to both the validity and nature of these claims, mentioning that "they said you were always in trouble" (50). While the narrative does not divulge the truth of these claims, the defensiveness in Bigger's tone all but implies that he may well have committed the act "with some boys [when] the police picked us up," even though it is equally likely that Thomas was a victim of racial profiling (50). The most important aspect of this accusation is the weight that it holds, irrespective of its validity. In other words, it does not matter whether or not Bigger actually stole those tires; he had already been marked with an irrevocable identity of a thief, in both the eyes of the "relief people" and his deceptively benign employer. The interrogation contextualizes Bigger more by illustrating his unconscious familiarity with law enforcement, thus, hyper-criminalization.

Bigger's interactions with Mary Dalton center around a fear of being seen in public with a white woman lest he draw unsolicited attention towards himself and be subjected to criminalization for stepping outside of his space in the US American racial hierarchy. His first assignment is to drive the young woman to her university for a night lecture. In reality, the evening evolves into an excursion into the South Side wherein Bigger is forced to invite paternalistic forces into his space:

The car sped through the Black Belt, past tall buildings holding black life. Bigger knew that they were thinking of his life and of his people. Suddenly he wanted to seize some heavy object in his hand and grip it with all the strength of his body and in some strange

way rise up and stand in naked space above the speeding car and with one final blow blot it out-with himself and them in it. (70)

Bigger grows unnerved and distressed at the thought of exposing his personal life to the world of those who don't inhabit those spaces. Wright seizes these moments of intrusion by the white world in continuing to utilize free indirect discourse, in which he inhabits the psychological space of Bigger to communicate to the reader the young man's feelings of vulnerability and unsolicited spectatorship to an insatiable audience in Mary and Jan.

Wright rhetorically raises questions to the reader: "Why didn't they leave him alone? What had he done to them? What good could they get out of sitting here making him feel so miserable" (70). This indirect mode of narration allows the readers to somewhat sympathize with Bigger in his subjection to exploitative voyeurism of Mary and her friend Jan, specifically for the nuanced perspective that it affords. That is, the free indirect discourse functions narratologically in allowing the narrator to juxtapose Bigger's thoughts with the scenes he enacts, the confluence of which culminates in an access to Bigger's rage that he does not entirely comprehend but about which the reader can hypothesize and emphasize with and for him.

Unable to hide his embarrassment, Bigger stands in discomfort when his white counterparts request him to open up his marginalized world to them with little to no regard of their impact on his positionality. Their actions, while inherently benevolent, mirror the type of scrutinization and surveillance to which Bigger customarily experienced throughout his lifetime, and his inability to distinguish the differences serves as a testament to his state of depersonalized anger. He comports himself in a manner that conveys hatred and indifference, but his actions connote a fear of whiteness that emanates from ostracization and alienated labor, alienation of his identity.

Upon returning to the Dalton household, Bigger assists an inebriated Mary to her room. Bigger's anxieties are no less exacerbated by his race and its long legacy of lynching in the United States, of which he is fully aware will result in the most inhumane sentence possible. That is, Bigger being caught alone in a room with a young white woman will likely lead to racialized assumptions of black masculinity, which date back to slave caricatures. He will not only be seen as a violent assailant but also a sexual predator exploiting a vulnerable young white woman, a figure of purity. Despite his inability to vocalize this fear, it becomes clear that Mary's blind mother materializes in the doorway like a mysterious phantasm as Bigger grapples with how to handle the precarious situation:

Bigger held his breath. Mary mumbled again; he bent over her, his fists clenched in fear. He knew that Mrs. Dalton could not see him; but he knew that if Mary spoke she would come to the side of the bed and discover him, touch him. he waited tensely, afraid to move for fear of bumping into something in the dark and betraying his presence. (85)

In the moment, his fear of being detected appears as a rational and even sensible concern that requires quick thinking. Bigger responds to the social structures of this situation in attempting to absolve himself of his societal transgression. In essence, Bigger fears the reality of being criminalized for something he did not do: raping a white woman. He proceeds to force a pillow over Mary's face, smothering her to death. Lest he betray his presence to the blind mother, Bigger chooses to resist the stereotypes assigned and prescribed to him in what becomes an unanticipated accident, the murder of Mary Dalton, as his extensive hold on her face causes her to suffocate. Ultimately, the looming fear of incarceration and likely the death penalty become the impetus for Bigger's movements in this event. It becomes a moment of resistance that enacts

a cascading effect on a chain of other unforeseen instances in his life, which sets him on the run as a wanted fugitive.

The novel makes a concerted effort not to acquit nor absolve Bigger of his crimes. Rather, it manages to reflect its interrelationality to racism, showing how racism conditions and guides him through each difficult decision. Once he becomes a fugitive, Bigger contemplates his true comprehension of whiteness and mobility within said whiteness. Heretofore, the novel broaches this discussion through Bigger's interactions with his friends, one in which they pretend to "act white" and another in which they watch several media projects in a movie theater. No longer becoming isolated reflective moments, these scenes convey the interconnectedness with which Bigger has come to perceive and understand whiteness, and it plays a formative role in the realization of his identity and understanding of blackness. While he is on the run, Bigger's conceptualization of systemic oppression materializes:

As the car lurched over the snow he lifted his eyes and saw black people upon the snow-covered sidewalks. Those people had feelings of fear and shame like his. Many a time he had stood on street corners with them and talked of white people as long sleek cars zoomed past. To Bigger and his kind 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. As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. As long as they lived here in this prescribed corner of the city, they paid mute tribute to it. (114)

As a product of both his very limited proximity to white people and unabated racism, Bigger (and supposedly the rest of the black community) views whiteness as an unbridled, uncompromising force that envelops all of those within its vicinity. Bigger's internalization causes him to recognize whiteness as a monolithic entity that inhibits him from being able to consciously individuate white people against each other as thoughtful, human beings. This mechanization of race and humanity, of course, holds with it a reciprocal outcome on how Bigger sees himself within this picture of race. That is, because he cannot intuit individuality in white people, he equally cannot see himself as an autonomous being. This introspective moment all but fosters depersonalization within Bigger as he becomes further and further removed from the society that cultivated his self-destruction. His failure to identify and acknowledge any sense of agency on his own power accesses those recesses of his mind where he sees this reality exemplified. His community knew not to transcend the imaginary lines of demarcation that essentially instantiate class boundaries.

A carceral forcefield almost encloses the black community, keeping them marginalized while also penalizing them for trespassing these boundaries. Bigger does not need to know what led to the marginalization of the black community such that he sees unattainable wealth and prosperity less than ten blocks from his neighborhood. In the same movie theater in which he watches a newsreel correlating whiteness to the ideal virtue, he sees a film caricaturizing black people as bestial savages. The juxtaposition between these reflections of white and black people reflects the extent to which the dominant white society controls Bigger's understanding of his skin and identity. It shows how disseminated media can implant sentiments of racialized inferiority in minority communities who have little to no access to resources, resources which can change that narrative. The class disparities almost seem natural to those ensconced in the

lower ends of the hierarchy, making the “natural white force” seem less malevolent if not more benign. The media’s depiction of blackness represents a larger social imagination of blackness through savagery and danger, a racialized theme that underscores carcerality.

While he is unaware of the logistics of his economic conditions, Bigger-to some degree-understands the significance of his community’s positionality. As he attempts to conjoin the discordant pieces of the puzzle, Bigger catches sight of a sign advertising real estate in his neighborhood. He recognizes that “he had never seen Mr. Dalton until he had come to work for him; his mother always took the rent to the real estate office” and that “he could not live in a building across the ‘line’” (174). Wright creates another moment of topographic restrictions, this time on which elucidates to Bigger his employer’s complicity in his family’s destitution. Mr. Dalton represents the powerful opulent and (even more important) magnanimous savior figure who consciously works towards the full amelioration of marginalized communities, as Mary pointed out to Bigger. However, this narrative indeed collapses as Bigger slowly processes “[Dalton] would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot” (174). Wright makes a point to establish that Bigger was indeed conscious as the young man makes no qualms about continuing with his ransom note upon deeper consideration of this observation.

If Bigger’s inability to identify individuality further ignites his own depersonalization, his life on the run shows society’s ultimately dehumanizing response to his criminal activity. Searches and seizures pervade all of Chicago as policemen round up scores of African American men. Newspapers randomly emerge out of oblivion as Bigger identifies the newly recreated image cast for him throughout the society. Aside from police profiling, a local corner newsstand informed that “reports were current that several Negro men were beaten in various North and

West Side neighborhoods” and that “several hundred Negro employees throughout the city had been dismissed from jobs” (244). Bigger’s actions directly led to a quarantine of Chicago, a topographic shift which restricts the capacity for minorities to navigate even their own neighborhoods.

The mayhem ensuing within Chicago incontestably reflects space’s capacity to recreate identities to those who violate or transgress the social fabric of society, as seen in its wide circulation: dissemination augments credibility as Bigger’s image multiplies ubiquitously across Chicago in different ways. Newsstands, as literature, demonstrate one of the central resources society uses to project and hyper-criminalize. Even still, Bigger comes into contact with his identity in several different areas outside of literature, another one being an overheard conversation between two African American men discussing the ramifications of his actions. The nature of their conversation seemingly reflects different ends of the spectrum regarding black consciousness. One speaker passionately states that he would unabashedly turn in Bigger to the authorities if the opportunity were to present itself, to which his interlocuter Jim inquires:

“But, Jack, s’pose he ain’ guilty?”

“Whut in hell he run off fer then?”

“Mabbe he thought they wuz gonna blame the murder on *him!*”

“Listen, Jim. Ef he wuzn’t guilty, then he outhgta stayed ‘n’ faced it. Ef Ah knowed where tha’ nigger wuz Ah’d turn ‘im up ‘n’ git these white folks off me.”

“But, Jack, *ever*’ nigger looks guilty t’ white folks when somebody’s done a crime.”

“Yeah; tha’s ‘cause so many of us act like Bigger Thomas; tha’s all. When yuh ack like Bigger Thomas yuh stir up trouble.”

“But, Jack, who’s stirring up trouble now? The papers say they beatin’ us up all over the city. They don’t care whut black man they git. We’s all dogs in they sight! Yuh gotta stan’ up ‘n’ fight these folks” (252).

Bigger is close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation, close enough to hear not only what society thinks of him but also how the two men’s lives have drastically changed because of him. From Jack’s perspective, Bigger is solely culpable in mandating the government’s decision to proliferate law enforcement and unleash terror upon countless people of color. He positions Bigger as the focal point for black people’s oppression, highly critiquing him as the catalyst that makes systemic racism the necessary corollary. Conversely, Jim indicts the virulent racism undergirding the foundation of their society, arguing that any scapegoat was requisite for society to justify its universal homogenization of black people. Jim aligns moreso with the imperative for black resistance and mobilizing black unity to combat a dehumanizing world while Jack identifies less with resistance and more with self-preservation and safety due to the target already placed on the backs of minorities.

Eventually, authorities catch and arrest Bigger and keep him detained in holding. His experience at a formal inquest emulates the spectatorship of a mob coalescing to watch justice prevail over a criminal. Echoing the force of the earlier advertising poster, the crowd in the inquest watches him from all sides, mirroring the gaze of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, overwhelming him to the point of fainting.² Upon his return to consciousness, Bigger gains access to a *Chicago Tribune* paper, wherein he catches an even deeper glimpse into society’s outlook on him: “ ‘He looks exactly like an ape’ ...he gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength...his lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle

² Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon*, 50

beast” (279). Now reducing him to the figure of a Negro sex-slayer, the newspaper consistently analogizes him with animals to convey the totality of his transgression, to make sense of it to the public so that he endures a painful death sentence. While the earlier corner newsstand gave contextuality and evidence to the actual crime, the *Tribune* gave the public a visual to consume, new language to articulate and naturalize the inferiority of black people as Bigger becomes a representation of blackness.

As Bigger thinks more about the hopelessness of his situation, he recognizes the complexity of his anger in a way that elucidates each threshold of crime as he crosses them. Imprisonment and the impending reality of inevitable death give him ample time to delve into further introspection, but religion seems to be the catalyst for change. While in jail, a preacher from his neighborhood visits to offer him a final chance at penitence and spiritual redemption for his sins, forcing Bigger to confront the phantasms of people he victimized. The vision of Mary facilitates an inner discourse that further nuances Bigger’s claim to his own agency:

He had killed within himself the preacher’s haunting picture of life even before he had killed Mary; that had been his first murder. And now the preacher made it walk before his eyes like a ghost in the night, creating within him a sense of exclusion that was as cold as a block of ice. Why should this thing rise now to plague him after he had pressed a pillow of fear and hate over its face to smother it to death? To those who wanted to kill him he was not human, not included in that picture of Creation; and that was why he had killed it. To live, he had created a new world for himself, and for that he was to die. (284-285)

Wright returns to free indirect discourse this time to anticipate Bigger’s fate and somewhat suture his own preparation for it. This personal interaction with Mary, however, integrates

fantastical imagery in Bigger's psychic episode with the preacher, reifying victims as ghosts of his past. Bigger was depersonalized in his lack of an identity, and his crimes created a justification for society to ruthlessly dehumanize him while erasing the factors that may have led to his crimes. Indeed, he was never considered human, never considered for equality in life or death. By changing his own narrative, he had effectively "killed" it and removed himself altogether, a resistance punishable by electric chair.

The novel makes a concerted effort not to acquit nor absolve Bigger of his crimes, yet it manages to reflect their tethering to racism, showing how racism conditions and guides him through each of his decisions. In other words, here white society tries to make crime the problem of the black community. Wright uses grotesque realism to emphasize the fact that society's representations of Bigger and the black community do not resolve the issue of violence and that society is highly complicit in creating the criminal, hence the title. *Native Son* indicts the mob mentality as a catalyzing force in the criminal justice system. Bigger is a product of America, having been born and assimilated into its culture. Therefore, if Bigger is a monster, U.S. society deserves a fair amount of blame. Moreover, in making crime the problem of the black community, what is overlooked is that society itself is not a safe space for the black community. Like the novel, chapter one of this project begins and ends with the question of violence. The rat from the beginning symbolizes the impoverished conditions of the family but also serves as an analogy for Bigger, that is, in the same way that Bigger smacks down the rat in disgust, society subjects Bigger to the same kind of mistreatment. Thus, Wright argues that this deadly feedback loop does not produce justice or safety; that victimization happens reactively and violently; and that no one gets safety from it. These sanctions on crime fix a temporary issue while

circumventing the issues and circumstances that led to their occurrence. Until such underlying issues are adequately addressed, the larger issues of violence will persist.

Along with the question of violence, this novel carves out the carceral imagination through the racialized layout of Chicago and Bigger's internalization of the white gaze. His numerous critiques on the implications of this protest novel notwithstanding, James Baldwin famously asserts that "No American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull."³ By this, Baldwin means that black Americans live in a reality marked by double consciousness that forces them to comport to white standards for both acceptance and survival. The white gaze over black Americans defines blackness through homogenizing representations of violence and psychically imprisons them within it. Even amidst a particularly negative critique of *Native Son*, Baldwin does not deny the existence of this dichotomous identity which is imposed onto African Americans. Similarly, Frantz Fanon describes the buildup of white societies subordinating blackness to humanity such that African Americans must be black first and human second, that "in the end, Bigger Thomas acts. To put an end to the tension, he acts, he responds to the world's anticipations."⁴ Both Baldwin and Fanon articulate the experience and psychic disposition of the carceral imagination vis-à-vis Bigger Thomas and the white gaze. Especially during this time period, African Americans experienced a vicious cycle of racist violence that controlled their actions as well as limited their sense of self-worth. In transitioning to another work of fiction, albeit much more recent, one may recognize the connections between Wright and Ward insofar as they appear to think along similar racial dynamics.

³ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, 42

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 265

Chapter II: Ghosts

Several generations removed from Wright's work, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* addresses the continuity of racism in the South. Unlike Wright's work, which features a tragic Bigger driven boxed, by the sentence of double consciousness, into a life of crime, Ward's novel features the dynamics of a family entangled in the racial legacies of the deep South in Bois Sauvage, a fictitious town in Mississippi. The dialogue between these two novels becomes more concrete when considering the logistical nature of the Great Migration: many African Americans, including Bigger Thomas's fictional family and Richard Wright himself, moved to Chicago from Mississippi in search of financial prosperity and escape from discrimination. I argue that the double consciousness Wright depicts in Bigger's tragic fate finds itself in dialogue with a modern contemporary understanding of black consciousness in Ward. In *Native Son*, the setting takes place under the regime of Jim Crow, reaching into a non-Jim Crow state; whereas, *Sing* focuses on the legacy of Jim Crow reverberating long beyond its legal conclusion.

Conveyed through several narrators, the novel takes on the task of resurrecting painful memories and experiences through continuous storytelling. Perhaps the most central protagonist, Jojo, begins this story crossing a major threshold: his thirteenth birthday. Bigger, who was 20, similarly stood on the precipice of adulthood but had a much lesser degree of innocence defining his character, one incommensurate with a teenager. At the outset, Jojo seeks to manifest his newfound transcendence as his grandfather Pop, one of the only stable figures in his life, slaughters a goat. Jojo wants to essentially prove his transition into adulthood by behaving like one, a strategy of ingratiation that dissolves the moment he vomits in childlike weakness.

Along with emulating the mannerisms of his grandfather, Jojo consistently looks to this father figure for wisdom and guidance, as shown in one of the earliest inquiries of the novel

where he asks the latter to discuss formative moments in his lifetime. Specifically, Jojo entreats Pop to tell him a story about his time spent in Parchman, Mississippi's infamous maximum-state penitentiary. Reluctant to disclose too much sensitive material, Pop uses discretion in discussing the story of his transfer to prison with his brother Stag decades earlier.

Jojo and the reader learn that Pop was sentenced to prison for harboring a fugitive in his brother Stag, who assaulted a white man at a local bar; in reality, Stag's actions were in self-defense, and Pop was criminalized for simply being in the same household as his brother when the lawmen arrived. Jojo's grandfather concludes his story by communicating that "*I was fifteen. But I wasn't the youngest noway...that was Richie*" (19). Pop's opening narrative represents the carceral reality of young black men in the South, that is, Pop and twelve-year-old Richie together serve as a microcosm of the extent to which a disproportionate number of young black men are ensnared by this prison in the South. Parchman, thus, symbolically encapsulates the interconnectedness of carceral realities that thread in common the experiences of this particular demographic to rob them of their autonomy, identity, and future. More explicitly, it reads more as a deformation of Bigger's experience and a legacy for Jojo.

Parchman, otherwise known as the Mississippi State Penitentiary, is the oldest prison in Mississippi. Parchman is the state's only maximum-security facility for men, disproportionately replete with black inmates. In the midst of the Jim Crow South, black men as young as twelve years old were often criminalized for objectively petty crimes to proliferate the inmate population and perpetuate the convict leasing system that substantively aided the economy.⁵

⁵ The following article provides historical context on the Mississippi State Penitentiary: <http://msbluestrail.org/blues-trail-markers/parchman-farm>

Pop, who was only 15 years old as a prisoner, pays little to no attention at this oddity and focuses on his younger inmate.

Richie, he was called. Real name was Richard, and he wasn't nothing but twelve years old. He was in for three years for stealing food: salted meat. Lot of folks was in there for stealing food because everybody was poor and starving, and even though White people couldn't get your work for free, they did everything they could to avoid hiring you and paying you for it. (21)

Richie, who is younger than Jojo in Pop's narrative, represents the immediacy with which young black men are hyper-criminalized and swept into a destructive cycle of inescapable confinement. The narrative creates two parallels for Jojo: one in his grandfather and the other in Richie as a bleak relic of Pop's past who resembles Jojo's spirit and comparative agency. The penitentiary becomes one of the principal settings that defines Jojo's life as its imminent, virulent force continues violently to keep African Americans on the outskirts of racial equality.

Pop minces no words in depicting the reality of prison as a continuation of extractive labor, an evolution of slavery into the early twentieth century. Indeed, Parchman Farm served as a prominent setting for inmate labor. Its strong resemblance to a working farm comes from its origins as a plantation that was purchased by the state of Mississippi. Throughout its history, Parchman enlisted most of its prisoners to work in the fields, as its location was ripe for the cotton industry.

We learn through Leonie-Jojo's mother-that his father Michael (who is white) is awaiting release from prison at the conclusion of the Jojo's birthday party. His perception of both of his biological parents implies that he has been estranged from them for some time: "it was a new thing, to look at her rubbing hands and her crooked teeth in her chattering mouth and not hear

Mama in my head but her name: *Leonie*...Michael is an animal on the other end of the telephone behind a fortress of concrete and bars” (17,29). He sees these two individuals, not as loving figures who conceived him, but as harbingers of bad things. Ward reinforces the loss of his father to the criminal justice system as a repetition of the debilitating trope of absent fatherhood with young black boys. However, Jojo finds his own way to manage and cope with parental neglect, often responding to these elements through his own conception of resistance, most prominently by “fathering” his younger sister Kayla. Kayla, a three-year-old child who is biracial like her older brother, looks up to Jojo as a parental figure, always seeking attention and care from him rather than their mother. In several important moments, Leonie implicitly and explicitly provides commentary on the relationship between her two children, which consequently reveals her failures as a parent. In one instance, Leonie takes a step back and objectively describes Jojo’s nurturing nature in his interactions with Kayla:

“I’m sorry you feel sick,” Jojo says, and Michaela begins to cry. He rubs her back and she rubs his, and I stand there, watching my children comfort each other. My hands itch, wanting to do something. I could reach out and touch them both, but I don’t. (101)

Here, alternatively, Leonie reveals her positionality within these interactions, her negligent presence towards both of her children in the midst of their peaceful relationship.

It feels good to be mean, to speak past the baby I can’t hit and let that anger touch another. The one I’m never good enough for. Never Mama for. Just Leonie, a name wrapped around the same disappointed syllables I’ve heard from Mama, from Pop, even from Given, my whole fucking life. I dump Michaela, the wailing bundle, on the bed and begin toweling her off and she’s still kicking and

screaming and moaning and now saying “Jojo,” and I just want to give her one slap, or maybe two...(167)

In both cases, Leonie’s failures as a parent are utterly exposing, leaving Jojo to fill in this space. Jojo’s relationship to Kayla represents its own modicum of resistance. One may note how each scenario depicts Kayla’s strong attachment to Jojo and the latter’s natural inclination to nurture and comfort her. Instead of modeling after the negligent behaviors of his parents, Jojo aids his sibling and nurtures her in ways diametrically opposed from his own relationship to their mother. Jojo thus resists a hereditary cycle of parental neglect. He makes the choice to forge a strong bond with his younger sister, shaping his own reality.

During a hunting party gone awry, Leonie loses her older brother (named) Given via gunshot wounds inflicted by Michael’s cousin while Michael himself was not present. Through the revelation of Given’s death, Jojo’s identity becomes much more complex: he is a biracial male in Mississippi, a state that historically abides by the one-drop rule, which means that any drop of black blood makes someone entirely black.⁶ Although he occupies a liminal space through his racial composition, Jojo no less suffers from the reality of being phenotypically black, a characteristic of which he is painfully aware. This reality makes him exploitable and vulnerable to different sectors of hyper-criminalization and exclusion, even within his own family.

Ward uses Jojo (and Kayla)’s identity to discuss the liminal space of biracialism within both the black and white community. Upon his return from Parchman and to Jojo’s life, Michael expresses a strong desire to finally introduce Jojo and Kayla to the other side of their family by meeting their (white) grandparents. Leonie’s perspective of this interaction illustrates why the

⁶ James Davis, “Who is Black? One Nation’s Definition”

young children had gone so long without meeting their grandparents as she notes the air of contempt characterizing the couple, specifically the grandfather. The grandmother makes a strong attempt to be congenial as she makes honest conversation with them, showing a desire to be accepting and hospitable. However, her husband in no way tries to hide his racist hatred towards black people, believing that his son's proximity to African Americans is what led to Michael's corruption and subsequent imprisonment. Tension pervades in the room as the grandfather grows increasingly more contemptuous and disrespectful: "Raised by her, what you expect Maggie'...Hell, they half of her. Part of that boy Riv, too. All bad blood. Fuck the skin...told you never to sleep with no nigger bitch!" (207-208). The grandfather impugns their entire ancestry, critiquing the blood of blackness as naturally corrupt and immoral, holding both Jojo's mother and grandfather in strong contempt. As seen here, the confrontation between Jojo and the white side of his ancestry shows how biracialism can work as a genre of blackness rather than a category outside of it. Jojo's skin inhibits him from being recognized as anything other than a black child, even by his own family members. It is instead recognized as a stain that he cannot remove nor avoid. An arithmetic way to think of biracialism, that someone is both half black and half white, might lead to the assumption that the disadvantages associated with that reality might be evenly distributed as well; however, that reality can actually be far worse. Biracialism can easily amplify the problems of being black, especially as blackness continues to alienate the family. As the novel locates and situates Jojo's biracial identity within racism, the grandparents come to represent the imaginary of the War on Crime within the family, an evolving product of the Jim Crow South that manifests itself internally in Jojo.

His biracialism notwithstanding, Jojo is forced to grapple with the running theme of incarceration in his family. Despite him coming from both black and white parents, Parchman

bridges that gap, inextricably binding his identity and inhibiting him from being able to say otherwise. The penitentiary becomes everywhere and nowhere for the teenager, who visits the space with his mother to retrieve his estranged father and yet is unmoved by this strange setting, a setting which he knows all too well. The prison's omnipresence creates a carceral psyche within the boy as he struggles to divorce the narratives of his grandfather from the trip itself, to expunge the semblances of Richie from him entirely as the family leaves Parchman.

Jojo's identity becomes much more of an obstacle for him as he interacts with people outside of his family. Upon their way home from Parchman, the family is stopped by a police officer due to their reckless driving. Leonie depicts the astonishing growth of her son right before her. Her terrified thoughts upon registering the event demonstrate one of the few moments in the novel that allows readers to gain sympathy for her as a parent:

It's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to a police officer. It's easy to look at him, his weedy height, the thick spread of his belly, and think he's grown. But he's just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. I should scream, but I can't.

"Shit," Michael breathes.

The officer barks at him, the sound raw and carrying in the air, and Jojo shakes his head without pausing and staggers when the officer kicks his legs apart, the gun a little lower now, but still pointing to the middle of his back. (163-164)

Although it is clear to the reader and his family that Jojo is nothing beyond a harmless adolescent, the police fails to recognize any of these childlike qualities. The officer does not see an individual boy but rather another threat to his survival. He sees a threat to society that must be

addressed expediently. Jojo's identity cannot protect him from the outside world. His liminal intersectional identity "graduates" him to adulthood as the police officer weaponizes the ordinary movement of reaching into his pockets. The event paralyzes his mother, aware of the fact that she is helpless to defend her son lest she exacerbate the situation far beyond repair. Leonie's description of her son evokes an antithetical response to that of the police officer. While the officer's profiling seems to force manhood onto Jojo in its brutality, Leonie's depiction exposes her child's innate purity and youthhood. The disparity between these two interpretations serves as incontrovertible evidence for the nebulousness of a post-racial society and the push towards this carceral imagination for Jojo.

It is not until Jojo's toddler sister Kayla spreads herself across his back that the police officer comprehends the absurdity of the entire sequence, after the boy has helplessly assumed the position. It is easy to forget a boy is a boy when an instrument of law enforcement treats him with such disdain and dehumanization. It is indeed easy to misremember Jojo's age when an officer of the law plays target practice with the boy's life, aiming his gun from Jojo's face, to the back of his head, to the middle of his back, and back to his head. Jojo inaugurates the narrative with a feigned understanding of death. His multiracial ancestry manifests a historical conflation of irreconcilable differences in the vendetta between his two families, the culmination of which lies in interactions with law enforcement. This will likely not be the last time in which Jojo sees himself represented so heinously. Jojo comments on the scenario:

The image of the gun stays with me. Even after Kayla throws up, after the police officer checks my pants and lets me out of them biting handcuffs, even after we are all in the car and riding down the road with Leonie bent over sick in the front seat, that black gun is there. It is a tingle at the back of my skull, an itching on my shoulder. Kayla snuggles in

to me, quickly asleep, and everything is hot and wet in the car: Misty's sweating about the hairline, wet beads appear on Kayla's snoring nose, and I can feel water running down my ribs, my back. I rub the indents in my wrists where the handcuffs squeezed and see the gun, and the boy starts talking. (171)

Jojo describes his first direct encounter with law enforcement, his first indelible confrontation with hyper-criminalization. The reflection is quite immediate, both in terms of physical sensations and the searing memory that impacts him. He does not appear to actually be processing nor synthesizing the moment but rather purely experiencing it while his body remains in strict alignment. Along with the actual event, this contemplation captures his lack of wherewithal, his inability to take active part in his own suffering. Moreover, the introspection shows how the profiling is an imposition from outside, only allowing him to passively absorb it. The experience of physical racism leaves a stain on Jojo and deprives him of his youth and innocence. He never fully moves from this traumatic experience of police brutality, which alienates his identity. Insofar as Jojo recalls that the "image of the gun" stays with him, his excruciatingly vivid detail on the account substantiates that this was a formative experience. This reflection symbolizes his traumatic understanding of himself.

A trip to the gas station involves yet another scenario in which his skin disenfranchises him through veiled racism. A simple transaction occurs between Jojo and the cashier that manifests his ingrained ideology of self-policing. Although there appears to be an issue of communication, Jojo intends to rectify the problem by moving forward to hear the cashier's words, a gross miscalculation that reduces the situation to race. The cashier "moves back just a step: small as a slivered fingernail. A twitch. I remember I'm brown, and I move back, too" (175). In every other aspect the transaction, the cashier appears safe and somewhat congenial;

however, his unconscious communicated microaggression instantly reminds Jojo of his presence and utility to the world. Jojo recognizes the recoil as an implicit reminder that even though he is biracial, it is his mother's (black) side that overshadows his individual identity in these moments, in the same way that it dictated how the police officer treated him as a criminal. He did not require an adult's guidance to understand these situations; experiences in life forced him to learn them on his own, cultivating (and debilitating) his consciousness through racism.

Native Son fosters free indirect discourse to express the unmitigated thoughts of a tragic character, which enables Wright to index an authentic, unfiltered degree of narrative on the plight of young black men in Chicago. Likewise, as free indirect discourse allows *Native Son* to achieve a heightened sense of reality, Ward draws on phantasmagorical elements to expose the surreal nature of the everyday. Striving for authenticity, this novel historicizes the legacies of racialized violence through its incorporation of magical realism. Magical realism is a genre of literature that features fantastic elements as subsets of a real world, considerably blurring the line between the real world and fiction.⁷ Ultimately, magical realism depicts these fantastical events by layering them in realism, giving social and political relevance to traditionally mythical elements, such as fables and folk tales. In painting a more realistic view of the modern world, the narrative's manifold fantastic traits given to different characters and environments help to show that modern political realities can indeed be phantasmagorical. In this case, the political reality lies in the carceral, replicating the forcefield overlooking Bigger's outskirted Chicago. Although it is not magical realism, it is worth noting that Wright also uses fantastical images in *Native Son* in his final interaction with the phantasm of Mary, the congruence of which shows how magical

⁷ For more information on the use and history of magical realism, one may consult the following article: <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-magical-realism#what-is-magical-realism>

realism becomes a creative tool to illustrate the carceral reality that materially exists but remains perpetually unacknowledged, helping to recognize the legacies left behind by generations of violent racism.

Jojo possesses the supernatural abilities to understand and communicate with non-human entities, specifically animals and apparitions. It is why he is one of the only people who can actually recognize Richie on his way from the penitentiary after his family picks up Michael. Richie, the young man who went to Parchman with Pop, is now deceased, but he experiences a resurrection in his new existence as a ghost. His lack of an ability to be put to rest is predicated on a desire to understand the nature of his death. He consequently follows Jojo home to find the answer and to resolve the ambiguity surrounding his untimely death, thus allowing him to find home within himself and rest in peace. Jojo's symbiotic relationship with Richie emulates one of Bigger's final spiritual experiences in prison wherein his preacher forces him to confront his sins, the culmination of this being his engagement with the phantasm of Mary.

Ward's integration of magical realism within the narrative works successfully in two separate ways. It allows Jojo to spiritually connect with his grandfather, thereby learning more about his own background and the effect of prison and death on his ancestors. It also gives agency to a young character in Richie who never had the ability to exercise his independence while he was alive, a way of symbolically reawakening African American souls shut off from generations of violent racism. Pop ultimately reveals to Jojo that, as a legal gunman delegated with the task of hunting down fleeing inmates, he forced himself to murder Richie while his friend was on the run. His rationale being that the rapidly agglomerating white mob would unleash a much more brutal and grotesque murder of Richie, Pop reluctantly yet consciously resists against the regime of Jim Crow (like Bigger) by killing one of his closest friends.

Throughout his conversation with Jojo, the reader can recognize Pop's recurrent battle with his decision as he struggles to discuss Richie's final moments:

They was going to do the same to him. Once they got done with Blue. They was going to come for that boy and cut him piece from piece till he was just some bloody, soft, screaming thing, and then they was going to string him up from a tree. (254)

Native Son's Bigger commits each of his crimes to combat the hyper-criminalization of his enveloping society. Here, Jojo's grandfather recounts a difficult decision that he made in both duress and anticipation of the ubiquity of Jim Crow. He intentionally murders his friend so that the government may not have the chance to inflict unabated torture on Richie. Much different from the depiction of Jojo's resistance, Pop's decision ultimately impairs his life as he struggles in vain to remove the stain of Richie's blood on his hands, a stain that continues to follow him in his elderly state: " 'I washed my hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out...I can smell it under my skin. Smelled it the day they let me out on account I'd led the dogs that caught and killed Richie. Smelled it when I finally found his mama after weeks of searching, just so I could tell her Richie was dead...' " (256).

Both *Native Son* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* depict representations of violence resulting from generational oppression, both reinforcing the numerous situations in which characters are both depersonalized and dehumanized by racist institutions. Bigger and Jojo navigate and confront carceral spaces differently in ways that accommodate their agency along with reflecting the problems invoked in these spaces. Despite their separate maneuvers, they both must interact with the possible reality of prison and death. Bigger responds with murder and absconding from the premises, while Jojo subverts the stereotype of black masculinity in his caring relationship

for his sister along with helping to memorialize the unburied spirits across the South. These texts demonstrate the continuity of race relations in its marginalization of young black males who have no legitimate say in countering the narratives and identities looming over them. However, while *Native Son* shows the imposing nature of racist societies on black men, Ward develops this analysis by illustrating the human capacity of black men to care for other people.

In comparing the two works, one might fall into the misleading interpretation that Ward's work contrasts the nature of Wright's work in terms of its positivity. That is to say, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* reads less pessimistic but not to say more optimistic than *Native Son*, for the latter interpretation relies on the premise that its confrontation with racism propagates an optimistic reconciliation from its characters, which rejects the nuanced arguments of both works. While he finds his own way to resist hyper-criminalizing realities that are projected onto him through generational oppression, his experiences within the novel show how Mississippi represents a microcosm of the United States. Ward creates a depiction of historical continuity that appears less as a juxtaposition against *Native Son* and more as a refocused progression of Bigger's experiences that are examined across Jojo's life. Each of my texts illustrate the imposition of setting in relation to the carceral state. In Ward's novel, the carceral imagination operates in a combination of fictional and historical elements. While the town of Bois Sauvage is fictional, it exists in proximity to Parchman, a real prison. Thus, it is the tangible and historical real around which the imagined narrative circulates. Through this confluence of real and imaginary, the geography in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* instantiates the carceral imagination. The post-slavery carceral continuum takes a similar centrality in the final text as Wideman identifies the impact of prisons. Showing how society links deviance and carcerality to blackness, Wideman examines this imagined conflation across real lived experiences.

Chapter III: See No Evil

Differently from the previous works of fiction, the final text I analyze is a memoir centered on the lives of black men in late 20th century Pittsburgh. As nonfiction, the text differs from *Native Son* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by being explicitly reliant on facts and historical details. Nonfiction texts often delve more informationally on particular issues, focusing on rendering a present reality visible or comprehensible. Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*, in some ways, blends both fictional and nonfictional elements while functioning as a doubled memoir, of John Edgar Wideman and his brother Robert, and a sociopolitical argument for prison reform. Wideman organizes history by deploying fictional narratological techniques to create this memoir, creating a joined and counterposing narrative from the brothers' lived experience. Unlike a traditional biography or autobiography, the memoir involves a narrower range of events, a specific set of memories that takes precedence in the telling of a narrative. Moreover, the memoir is dependent upon consciousness by which Wideman and his brother reconstructs these events.

Brothers and Keepers navigates the worlds of two brothers who embark on disparate ways of life, the author (John) going to college to establish himself as a successful writer while his younger brother (Robert) succumbs to an existence of crime and drug use. The autobiographical account explores the diverging and converging worlds of two brothers raised in the same household. While the book expressly delineates the Wideman family tree in its early chapters, Wideman uses the narrative of his brother's life imprisonment to project a bleak account of American race relations as seen through the image of prisoners within it.

Throughout the memoir, Wideman reconciles with the tension of divergent pathways by modulating between an autobiographic account and a biography of his brother Robert. Such a

shift helps the narrative illuminate the experience of his incarcerated brother while unmasking John's pessimistic outlook on the marginalization of black Americans several decades following Jim Crow policies. The confluence of these two voices evokes the duality of W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness, a concept he used to articulate the plight of African Americans struggling to live in America. Specifically, double consciousness articulates the internal conflict of minoritized groups and encapsulates the psychological duality afflicting black Americans under a white hegemonic society. It entails a reality of individuals subject to different forms of policing and scrutiny, a reality in which African Americans continue to self-assess their worth and success against a devaluing and racist society. In his sociological work *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois addresses "this peculiar sensation...this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."⁸ Both Wideman brothers describe the feeling of being othered in society. The memoir dichotomizes the two men's experiences by showing their disparate yet not unrelated methods of responding to society's othering of them, perhaps arguing that these differing responses contributed to their taken paths. Wideman's distribution of narratological responsibility in these two experiences, reflects the shared (in)carceral imagination in the two brothers and across black individuals in general. They inhabit each other's spaces, remaining always tethered to one another, which means the reader is not to think of one without the other. Narratively, one imagines this story in a single point of view. Ultimately, it is imperative to inhabit both modes of existence simultaneously, not knowing one without the other. The double consciousness manifests stylistically in the memoir and the brother writing the story. Wideman presents the reader with the shape of the existential mode of double consciousness in the narrative shaped by

⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3

two identities. Although the two lived in the same household under similar circumstances, the memoir reflects the similar subjection of brothers to a larger institution.

Wideman uses time as a central element in the men's lives within the story, a continual theme with which the brothers are forced to grapple. Time occupies such a commanding force within the memoir that it becomes almost personified: a figure that they can not erase, dismiss, or deny, indeed the sentence of a prisoner is doing time. Time is something that one experiences and experiences one, as shown in the ensnaring experience of Robby's imprisonment. It becomes the mechanism of torture that elucidates to John the significance of Robby's diminished image in society, that is, organizing the length of Robby's sentence and the social imagination of prisoners. In particular, this shows that a carceral imagination can warp and distort temporality. Time subsumes the prisoner, reducing him spiritually and legally to a separate being than the one before he entered the walls of the penitentiary.

Aware that his college experience may fortify a language barrier between him and Robby, John assesses the length of his brother's sentence by the growth of his own daughter Jamila. Figuring that this barometer would be an easier and more personal way to communicate with his brother, John uses Jamila as a liaison connecting Robby to his family. However, Jamila's utility emerges as she grows older into an independent thinker with unique inquiries that reflect the distortion of temporality: "How long will Robby be in cage?" (34) Jamila, like Jojo's younger sister Kayla, provides the youthful insight that unconsciously addresses problems at their core in ways that seem invisible to the naked eye. Pursuant to Wideman's copious research on the origins of prisons, "the word 'jail' does in fact derive from 'cage,'" for "prisons in medieval England were basically custodial *cages* where convicted felons awaited punishment where the accused were held till traveling magistrates arrived to pass judgment" (34). While it

seems rather hyperbolic coming from a young child, the term “cage” is both sensible and etymologically accurate. John pinpoints his daughter’s reflection and its significance of mature and deeply complex issues:

Jamila knew what she was talking about. We said “jail” and she heard “cage,” heard steel doors clanking, iron locks rattling, remembered animals penned in the zoo. Kids use words in ways that release hidden meanings, reveal the history buried in sounds. They haven’t forgotten that words can be more than signs, that words have magic, the power to be things, to point to themselves and materialize. With their back-formations, archaisms, their tendency to play the music in words—rhythms, rhyme, alliteration, repetition—children peel the skin from language. (34-35)

Wideman uses an array of literary devices to construct and reconstruct this narrative. In this case, he uses his daughter Jamila in a scene to illustrate how we use words to hide realities from ourselves. Young children have an honest yet sophisticated method of interrogating the world, especially those concerning human rights. Jamila’s perspective of her uncle’s living conditions replicates not only the reality of his rights but specifically society’s outlook on the prison system. In her imagination, she analogizes her uncle’s prison cell to a cage, literally envisioning him trapped like an animal. While it seems hyperbolic, Jamila’s accurate comment presents a description, an image, that forces the reader to grapple with that reality of being caged and its strong undergirding questions of dehumanization.

As John oscillates between conversations with the reader and Robby, Wideman emphasizes the power of time as an active agent in the prison system. Wideman suggests to Robby to think of Jamila as “a yardstick for you...years registering in terms of pounds and

inches” while he begins to deconstruct his existing prison sentence for the reader, abstracting the implications of disenfranchising people of their freedom through the restriction of time in what he divines the logic of incarceration (35). Playing on the common phrase of “doing time,” John spends much of the narrative discussing the experience of time and the numerous appearances which it takes on in prison. Time is material, yet immaterial; tangible, yet metaphorical. With each and every element, time is an instrument utilized at the expense of the prisoner:

A narrow sense of time as a material entity, as a commodity like money that can be spent, earned, lost, owed, or stolen is at the bottom of the twisted logic of incarceration. When a person is convicted of a crime, the state dispossesses that *criminal* of a given number of days, months, years. Time pays for crime. By surrendering a certain portion of his allotment of time on earth the malefactor pays his debt to society.

But how does anyone *do* time outside of time? Since a person can’t be removed from time unless you kill him, what prison does to its inmates is make time as miserable, as unpleasant as possible. Prison time must be hard time, a metaphorical death, a sustained, twilight condition of death-in-life. The prisoner’s life is violently interrupted, enclosed within a parenthesis. The point is to create the fiction that he doesn’t exist. Prison is an experience of death by inches, minutes, hours, days. (35)

The preceding passage underscores time’s extractive effect on the prisoner. A give and take relationship, the prisoner pays for their transgression by *doing* time, a gradually building process of invisibility. This extractive process operates economically and spiritually. Reflecting the notion of poverty, Wideman illustrates that sentences can be purchased by those with more

money, thus reducing their sentences. In another way, prison time is a hard time in how it consumes the prisoner, eating the inmate's life away until they have fully "paid" their debt to society. Wideman's analyses distinguishes time for Robby and on Robby. For Robby, John inserts himself in conversation to help elucidate the terms of his imprisonment in ways that he can relate; however, John changes the narrative and redirects the conversation to the reader when regarding the impacts of imprisonment on Robby. Doing time means experiencing a version of time that eats away at the life of the inmate quite vigorously insofar as the unpleasant experience renders his existence invisible to society. Venturing one step beyond Wideman, I would argue that the experience of time not only creates a fiction that inmates do not exist but also fictionalizes the existence of inmates. In the process of invisibility, time de-individualizes prisoners, making them statistics rather than independent beings. Robby becomes a subject for the reader, a representation of the depersonalizing and dehumanizing effects when subject to the dispossession of time.

Robby concedes that he never gravitated towards the moral compass of his other siblings, that "in the real world, the world left for me, it was unacceptable to be 'good,' it was square to be smart in school, it was jive to show respect to people outside the street world...the world of the angry black kid growing up in the sixties was a world in which to be in was to be out-out of touch with the square world..."(58). As the youngest in the family, Robby observes that his experience of childhood was quite different from his older siblings, not only in societal standards but also in his socialization. While his older brother was away in college, Robby endured a different generation of Pittsburgh, one that changed his prioritization of values and cultivated his understanding of right and wrong. He lived through the changes that Wideman discussed far

away in his college lectures as a Professor. This reflection functions as a quasi-preface to Robby's life, showing briefly the origins of his resistant, or rather, rebellious nature.

Robby and John both speak on the family's perception of the former as the troublemaker, the one who is "always testing our parents, seeing how much he could get away with" (106). This observation unfolds as John narrates on a formative conflict between Robby and their father Edgar. After having his phone privileges revoked as punishment, Robby nevertheless continues to chat with a woman he was courting at the time, prompting an angry confrontation with Edgar. Tired of being beaten up by his large enraged father, Robby attempts to defend himself with a pair of scissors, threatening his father not to enter the room lest Robby attacks him. In a fit of more rage, his father yells: "Why are you doing this? Why don't you listen to what anybody tells you? You're just a rebel. A damned rebel" (110). From that moment, Robby acknowledges the consequences of this formative moment in his childhood: "I guess he decided it wasn't worth it. I guess he told me what he thought of me and didn't have no more to say...anyway that's part of the beginning...he never hit me again" (111). This anecdote suggests that Robby's relationship with his father and, perhaps, his family changed demonstrably after this event. A *damned* rebel, his father calls him with disdain and strained impatience. Interactions no longer held the same weight as Robby gravitated more towards the streets, perhaps making the father feel vindicated in his judgment. This scene depicts the ways in which the family can serve as a space of identity formation, how one's identity can be recreated and deformed. As Robby continues to grow, we see this rebellious personality manifest into other activities.

Robby speaks on the ubiquity of racism, specifically in the summer of 1968. He reminisces on the hectic, chaotic reality of consistent confrontations with policeman, who violently attacked him and the like at first sight. In school, Robby found utility in his rebellious

tendencies in fighting for social change against unfair educational policies, to putatively noticeable gains. After leading a county-wide strike, the grievances of the students were heard and addressed by the rest of the faculty; however, the feeling of success did not last long as Robby describes the changes in the school's infrastructure a few months later:

We come back to school in the fall and they got cops patrolling the halls and locks on every door. You couldn't go in or out the place without passing by a cop. They had our ass then. Turned the school into a prison. Wasn't no way to get in the auditorium. Wasn't no meetings or hanging out in the halls. They broke up all that shit. That's when having police in the schools really got started. When it got to be a regular everyday thing. (116)

Although this term is absent in this train of thought, Robby is describing a major function of the school-to-prison pipeline. In the transition between the Jim Crow era and the War on Crime, U.S. society not only continued to govern itself through crime and punishment but also began incorporating disciplinary resources across independently separate institutions that exist normally in local communities. That is, crime is now monitored less exclusively through the criminal justice system as unregulated policing strategies filter into workplaces, households, and perhaps most importantly-schools. As old institutions assume new roles in the community, the hyper-criminalization of young black boys increases substantially. Particularly within the school system, teachers approximate the role of prison guards, constantly monitoring and scrutinizing the presence of "at-risk" students who are perceived as threats to the inviolate sanctity of the classroom. In trying to ensure that these delinquent students abide by the rules, the teachers assume a position of authority that contributes to the marginalization of minoritized students

within the learning facility in the evolution of zero tolerance policies.⁹ These policies, promulgated in the 1990s to combat gun violence, replicate police strategies designed to sanction smaller offenses that were believed to lead to much more significant consequences. The theoretical agendas behind these policies diverge from their effects in reality. On an institutional level, schools themselves appear almost identically as prisons, hence Robby's observation of the change in his high school's appearance. Security cameras embed numerous schools in conjunction with an intense proliferation of security officers. The increased police presence, as seen through Robby's experience, plays a major role in the state's response to protest. Through this proliferation, the state institutes a model of incarceration by actively and ferociously suppressing dissent.

A mechanism of control, the school-to-prison pipeline recreates the environment of incarceration within the schools insofar as it becomes all but indistinguishable from a punitive space. Despite its attempt to curtail violence, the pipeline prepares young minds for incarceration rather than epistemological edification because it insists upon the removal of outliers from the space. Doing so forces the boys to internalize the different punitive structures as ubiquitous forms of rejection that physically distance them further and further away from the classroom. Consequently, minoritized youths who are targeted most often by these practices decide to dissociate themselves entirely from these repositories of unwarranted social conditioning. Robby's description of the phenotypic and structural transformation in his school reinforces yet another setting in which societal spaces increase their capacity for hyper-criminalization. Ironically this anecdote is the final childhood reference in this book before Robby delves into his participation in the criminal underworld.

⁹ Rios, *Punished*, 38

John, conversely, seeks the American Dream through a pursuit in education. Eager to distance himself from Pennsylvania, young John studies vehemently to attain multiple degrees and to establish himself as a college professor and prolific writer. This pursuit creates somewhat of a superiority complex that alienates him from the rest of his family as he tries to erase that part of his identity:

Most of what I felt was guilt. I'd made my choices. I was running away from Pittsburgh, from poverty, from blackness. To get ahead, to make something of myself, college had seemed a logical, necessary step; my exile, my flight from home began with good grades, with good English, with setting myself apart long before I'd earned a scholarship and a train ticket over the mountains to Philadelphia. With that willed alienation behind me, between us, guilt was predictable. (27)

Hoping to resist the poverty afflicting the black community, John assimilates to the standards of the white hegemony. His flight, his escape from his roots, manifests a desire to avoid racism through class. To be successful, college seemed naturally the best option, wherein he could adopt a new mode of thought, a new vernacular, a new identity refashioned for himself. John's mental and emotional separation from his family exacerbates while he is away in his books, always assessing his academic merits against the destitution of his black community back home. Young John associates blackness with the impoverished conditions reflecting his own community and vows to distinguish himself. Speaking now directly to Robby, John shows that he recognizes how much he needed home to assure himself that he made the right decision: "I needed home to reassure myself of how far I'd come...If I ever doubted how good I had it away...youall were back home in the ghetto to remind me how lucky I was" (27). An aggrandized sense of self-

importance it cultivated, that which makes him feel exceedingly guilty that he lost some of himself in the process, guilty that he is complicit in neglecting Robby in his formative years. Part of John's desire to write this memoir stems from his internal struggle with an ethical sense of failure on Robby, his failure to sufficiently fulfill that brotherly role by ensuring Robby that he would be a consistent presence in his life. John did not believe he was his brother's keeper, his protector to insulate Robby from the dangers of the outside world.

Ironically, the illusion that John's transcendence of race could be activated through upward mobility dissolves upon Robby's physical return to John's life. Encountering his brother for the first time in decades, John finally recognizes that his blackness tethers him to his brother:

Four black men had been involved. Three had been tentatively identified, which left one unaccounted for. I was black. My brother was a suspect. So perhaps I was the fourth perpetrator. No matter that I lived four hundred miles from the scene of the crime. No matter that I wrote books and taught literature and creative writing at the university. I was black. Robby was my brother. Those unalterable facts would always incriminate me. (14)

Despite his attempts to maneuver himself around racism, John sees that this shadow extends over all African Americans and knows no boundaries. Despite his academic background, detectives subjected John to the same hyper-criminalization as Robby, simply because John was black and automatically fit the profile that police desperately needed to identify a fourth perpetrator. No matter how far he traveled to distance himself, his blackness was immutable. The inextricability of the two brothers manifests through this meeting as the illusion of class shatters irrevocably for John. From this encounter onward, John develops a morally mature perspective that recognizes his brother's humanity in a way like never before, a uniquely personal understanding of Robert

Wideman that has not been captured by the rest of society. Over the course of this narrative, John attains an increasingly politicized consciousness that drives his argument for prison reform. Doing so helps him humanize his brother while also reconciling with his own failures to protect him.

It is 1982, six years removed from Robby's placement into custody, four years removed from his official life sentencing, and one year removed from the denial of his appeal by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. By this point, John had incorporated regular visits with his brother in the process of constructing the memoir. In the final section, John describes the discrepancy between the symbolism of these meetings and the reality of the situations themselves. He specifically identifies the repressive ambience of prison cast upon its environment, the subjection of which extends even to visitors. Entering the prison for him activates an ineffable sensation of helplessness:

Giving up one version of reality for another. That's what entering the prison was about...If black became white and good became bad and fast became slow, the players could learn the trick of reversing labels, and soon the upside-down world would seem natural. Prison is more perverse. Inside the walls nothing is certain, nothing can be taken for granted except the arbitrary exercise of absolute power. Rules engraved in stone one day will be superseded the next. What you don't know can always hurt you. And the prison rules are designed to keep you ignorant, keep guessing, insure your vulnerability. (183)

Wideman describes the experience of prison as a reversal of identity. Perhaps the scariest aspect of this setting, as Wideman perceives it, is its unpredictability, the mercurial intensity with which punishment is inflicted and enforced. Rules take on a new kind of stringency here under the

walls of the penitentiary for both inmates and visitors. What you do not know can, and will, always hurt you. This particular system functions to keep people ignorant and consistently vulnerable. Here, Wideman shifts his focus to the “antagonists” of the narrative: the keepers. The prison guards, the *keepers* of the inmates, operate the prison with *carte blanche* authority, and this minimizes any opportunity for any voice to challenge.

While time suspends the prisoner in a weightless paradigm of invisibility, the prisoner gradually undergoes an internal transformation that intensifies violently. By entering prison, inmates experience depersonalization in discarding their clothes to model the homogeneity of their new environment. It becomes a natural immersion yet forced initiation into a new existence. With these rules, prisoners take on a new identity, one that continues to deform the original image until it is no longer discernible to the naked eye:

Think of a fun-house mirror, a floor-to-ceiling sheet of undulating glass. Anything caught in the mirror is bloated, distorted. Prison’s like that mirror. Prison rules and regulations, the day-to-day operation of the institution, confront the inmate with an image of himself that is grotesque, absurd. A prisoner who refuses to internalize this image, who insists upon seeing other versions of himself, is in constant danger. (183)

The carceral imagination is an internalization of this process of identity (de)formation. It is an imagination given to individuals through reinforced conditioning. The shaping of identities exacerbates significantly when the hyper-criminalization is racialized. Thus, Wideman writes on both experiences of black Americans and prisoners, converging the two identities in the incarceration of his brother Robby. With the exercise of plenary authority, “keepers” have the autonomy to shape the realities and identities of prisoners. The image matters insofar as it

maintains a clear social hierarchy between the prisoner and the keeper. This overwhelming force works consistently to dehumanize the inmate, destroying the image that was once actively present by deciding for the prison who and what they are to be in this new existence. The carceral imagination here works as a confirmation of what black men see in themselves through the rest of society, the culmination of racial socializing that conflates black identity with prison, an internalization that is accomplished through intense hyper-criminalization. The moral, ethical, and legislative rules that define society are nonexistent within this space, as self-discipline forces prisoners to confront their distorted images, that which is cast by the prison guards to reflect society's perception of them. A prisoner's failure to adhere to this system, to accept their relegated role in the penitentiary, can (and often will) result in dangerous consequences. Thus, the keepers embody the role of society in reflecting the discipline, constantly projecting the concave fun-house mirror onto prisoners and reinforcing the duality of power within the prison. The walls recreate a fictionalized image of the self until there is nothing left: a metaphorical death. A new beginning, a new existence, is crafted, imposed on them.

After addressing the conditions of confinement, Wideman explores the space wherein inmates occupy in society and how their social death manifests on an outside level. The invisibility does not occur solely within the prison; it operates taxonomically and topographically as well. Aside from the sequestered areas within the prison, penitentiaries themselves are often secluded in their own demarcated areas. The place itself is closed off from society, as are the lives subsumed within it. Wideman describes this satiated desire to maintain boundaries in the foreclosure of inmate identities:

Prisoners are a unique minority: they exist in a political, ethical limbo vis-à-vis free world people. Out of sight, out of mind. Prisons segregate absolutely a

troublesome minority from the majority. It's in the self-interest of the majority to suspend all ties to prisoners. A brutal but simple expedient for accomplishing suspension is to lock up prisoners and charge the prisons with one task: keep these misfits away from us. (188)

Out of sight, out of mind. Separation is key; keep them away. Wideman takes this time to reinforce the duality between the two brothers, the double consciousness manifest in their relation to the prison: inside and out. Together, the bifurcation of their voices represents the distribution of the carceral imagination across their experiences. Prisons give us the illusion that we no longer have problems within society. We see no evil because the bad people are not within our space, because they are shut off in locations that are removed from the general population. We see no evil in the gross mistreatment of millions of souls and willfully ignore the consequences. Out of sight, out of mind. Keep the criminals confined. Prisons, especially in how they administer discipline, communicate to society that binaries of good and evil are not only legitimate but necessary in our reality. We need the incriminated population to remind us of how right-minded we are.

John confronts his own complicity in emotionally erasing his incarcerated brother: "If you're born black in America you must quickly teach yourself to recognize the invisible barriers disciplining the space in which you may move...compartmentalization begins with your black skin, with your acknowledgment of racial identity, and becomes both a way of seeing and being seen. Blackness is a retreat to the security of primal night. Blackness connects me to my brother but also separates us absolutely, each one alert, trembling behind the vulnerable wall of our dark skins" (220). By compartmentalizing, John subconsciously erased fragments of his brother from his life in order to cope with Robby's incarceration and with his own absence. Over the course of

this memoir, however, John unlearns that initial response of compartmentalization in his increasingly politicized consciousness. In defining his compartmentalization through his blackness and being seen, he succinctly underscores Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. Indeed, as Du Bois defines it, double consciousness describes blackness as a dichotomous social identity. Similar to Du Bois, John falsely imagines that he could elude his racist experiences through education and class. Du Bois articulates double consciousness as an experience inhabiting black people, which means that he would agree that both John and Robby individually have double consciousness. I argue, however, that this book symbolizes a variant of double consciousness, that Wideman maps out both a doubleness and consciousness that unifies the two brothers. For Du Bois, this double consciousness must adhere within the individual, but Wideman's bifurcation of the two voices locates a reimagined double consciousness, one that adheres in the dialogue between two people. Each brother thinks in absence of the other, their blackness activating the doubleness. John, the outside brother, is doubled by the insideness of Robby. Wideman maps out both the doubleness and unified consciousness to show that the precarity of black existence is its perpetual tethering to the prison. This variant of double consciousness operates seamlessly within the carceral imagination. Seeing as though double consciousness measures how society scrutinizes blackness, I argue that a world dominated by incarceration shows that double consciousness always includes the prison. Thus, my vision of Wideman's memoir redeploys Du Bois's double consciousness to address new social circumstances, incorporating the evolution of Jim Crow within the contemporary period of mass incarceration.

Amidst this socio-political argument for prison reform, Wideman thus observes the inter-implicated connection between society and the prison, stressing that there should be an ethical

sense of accountability for self-reflection. Racism fortifies a psychic debilitation of black Americans in this carceral imagination: in the same way that society pathologizes race, society also pathologizes criminality, asking black people to see themselves deficient and criminals deviant. At the beginning of the memoir, the two brothers are very different, yet they are deeply related by the end. The memoir transitions from a biographical account of family relations to a larger call for society to understand one another, the empathy culminating in a sweeping overturn of a ruthlessly disproportionate criminal justice system. Taking an autobiographic form and making it multi-biographical, Wideman shows the interrelation and penetration of the human psyche, that we are not merely dependent but intimately intertwined.

From Wright to Ward to Wideman, the carceral imagination of prison looms imminently and ominously in the background as a compilation of microaggressions and social structures, viciously manifesting in the wave of mass incarceration. Each text that I analyze demonstrates the imposition of society onto minorities and the deformative effects of race within this projection. More specifically, the centrality of race suffused with hyper-criminalization intensifies within the demographic of African American men. Beyond tangible impact, the writers articulate the psychological debility entailed by intuitive self-policing, seeing oneself in absence of oneself. Whether through fictional techniques or sociological theories, the writers strongly convey the capacity of black men to think as independent agents and human beings who are not limited to a carceral confine. In each case, the people within the texts resist and challenge these social imaginaries created to subsume their identities, many times to no avail, sometimes with success whole or partial. While the carceral imagination operates partially through societal scrutiny, the writers' analyses of this imaginary locates humanity within these individuals insofar as they affirm the absolute value and worth of black lives altogether. During a present wherein

minority populations are criminalized at a significantly higher rate than others, it is imperative to underscore the social implications of willful ignorance to such an intricately organized criminal justice system. Realities do not end when they are out of sight. Ignorance is not always bliss. To see no evil is to deny involvement, to reduce the weight of complicity and to displace it onto others, to see but not to see.

Epilogue: A Poem

Philosophy of Miseducation

Do you hear that?

That is the sound of nothing

The inextricable culmination of life

Resides in my spacious playground

My environment is self-effacing

Cultivated to accommodate one's displacement

The room is clean, yet desolate

Arguably immaculate

Not even a handful of dust ever accumulates in the corner

My arachnophobia exacerbates upon peripheral sighting

The shadow upon the wall betraying the presence of a new adversary

I am truly a part of all that I have met

Subjected to the confines of my inner mind and self

For twenty-three hours a day I am told

Outside forces ensure the vacuous presence of windows

Windows barred to preclude the emission of light

Conditions of confinement equipped to sustain

Evolving standards of human decency

This is day one

Humanity and personhood

Do they account for deviant, unlawful behavior?

How about isolated mishaps and insignificant risks of unnecessary suffering?¹⁰

Perhaps crime externalizes my humanity

It proves rationality and reflects my conscience¹¹

Flesh and bone serve as pre-requisite characteristics

Facilitating my indefinite detainment

There lie the basic necessities of life

Adequate food, shelter, and sanitation¹²

Structured to foster a meaningfully human existence

Yet what is perhaps common to some

i am cold

Fails to make my own deprivation less bitter¹³

hungry too

Which compels me to inquire upon

The constitutionality and penological justifications of this sequence

Despite these obstructions

My psyche remains intact

One could snicker at these void attempts to institutionalize me

Alienation and scrutiny encapsulate my life

If who I am generates no substance

¹⁰ *Baze v. Rees*, 20

¹¹ *Creswell's Executor v. Walker*, 5

¹² *Madrid v. Gomez*, 96

¹³ Alfred Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam," VI

Then what I am illuminates a power dynamic bereft of empathy

You may classify this situation as the master-slave dialect

For me it denotes deliberate indifference¹⁴

This is day 7

Do you hear that?

That is the sound of codification

Binaries mandated for the sake of interminable exclusion

Taxonomies that persistently eat away at my senses

Society endorses such labelling

The prison endorses othering

Division permeates everything

Special housing to segregation units

Administrative and protective seg.

SMU and LTSU

i managed to graduate to two

All to reduce us flagrant incorrigibles

Who dare to exhibit continually disruptive behavior¹⁵

To be or not to be recalcitrant

That is the objective

The spider has now become a frequent inhabitant

Wistfully traversing along our wall

Feigning conversation with his webs and intricate movements

¹⁴ *Madrid v. Gomez*, 96

¹⁵ *Beard v. Banks*, 3

Reminding me of my conflicted state of being
Which is unbearably light
Yet I am suspended in a weightless paradigm
An inmate who is neither in nor out
But utterly enclosed in a segmented space
Imagine
Feeling as though you were ordained
To be dissected at every possible angle¹⁶
Like a patient etherized against a sky that you can never see ¹⁷
As if you were the epicenter of a mass quarantine
There is homogeneity in power
The need to induce an indelible state of consciousness and perpetual invisibility
Who are we but products of corporeality?
Dismantled by dissymmetry, disequilibrium, and difference
Atomization is the key
The machinery of power embodying discipline
Discipline encompasses deterrence
Deterrence negates rehabilitation
To think, none of this would have transpired
Had I not physically assaulted him,
That invidiously complicit guard,
And subsequently destabilized the cherished power balance.

¹⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon*, 50

¹⁷ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 3

To think that one egregious offense would render my life inconsequential

i am going to show you, inmate

Now I am universally accepted as detrimental

you've just earned yourself a week in the box

Who if I cried out, would care to hear me?¹⁸

This is day ten

right?

What does humanity feel like?

One gets to learn very much about oneself during 23 hours of contemplation

I'm longing for my eight-legged comrade

Whom I haven't encountered in days

Maybe he's grown weary of me too

As a consequence of my legal transgressions,

I am denied any remnant of human interaction

Inhibiting me from experiencing

That nostalgic feeling

Of touch

Non-contact visits

They see me through a glass

Blankly

Not even a phone call

¹⁸ Rainer Maria Rilker, *Duino Elegies*

I'm struggling to recall the last time

job

The last time we spoke

mom

I am longing to feel

baby what have they done to you

Aspiring to touch

Memory and desire, amalgamating

please don't leave me

It feels like perfect sensory deprivation

Have you noticed the door was made of solid steel?

The brightness is unfathomable

It is always so bright, but why?

I just want to hug you

I feel someone shouting

Hushing the murmur of maternal castigation

where are you going

If winter kept us warm

Then why am I still cold inside

get away me

No way for one to forget what you never experience

The true physicalization of punishment

Sans the physicality

Consider me a wandering Jew

The Dead Letter Office is calling¹⁹

For whom the cell tolls

I would prefer not to²⁰

Endure these insufferable conditions

But

That is not up for discussion

I am a cadaverous utility

London bridge fell down quite a while ago

A delicate imbalance seizes me

and indeed there won't be time²¹

hurry up please it's time²²

we never had world enough

nor time to begin with²³

I must be a specter

Colorlessly vacant and intricately white

Not unlike a dog

Constantly transcending boundaries

¹⁹ Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," 54

²⁰ Ibid., 25

²¹ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 23

²² T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," 141

²³ Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," 1

The bill of attainder seeks to mask

The reality of my tomorrow

You see the dyads continue?

Thing and self

Physical and incorporeal

Measuring my numbered life out in tablespoons²⁴

i am suffocating

where do we go from here

I know my constitutional rights

My playground does not accommodate the Eighth Amendment

Makes no space for the First either d

So it cannot be cruel and unusual

ah! What fools these inmates be²⁵

Ah solitary!

Ah humanity!²⁶

Is this day 21?

Does it matter

Do you hear that?

That is the sound of wind

²⁴ Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," 51

²⁵ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5

²⁶ Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," 54

Howling yet faintly making herself known

Hypersensitized to my own surroundings

I can feel the wind through audition

One cannot help but smile

Solitary encourages processes

Eat. Excrete. Sleep.

Wake up. Repeat.

Wander. Ponder.

Pace about the cell

one two three

one two three

one. two. three

Move to the cadence of thine own isolation

Boredom must be controlled and neutralized

Or else you'll lose yourself

i am cold again

After spending so much time here

I learn more and more each day

Forced to reconcile the prolonged absence

Of my cohabitating arachnid

I now spend my days awaiting brief interactions with him

The guard who guards my door like a sentinel

He distributes to me the same inconsumable gunk

hello jared

He refuses to converse with me

That would require him to acknowledge my existence

Instead

He inserts the food in the door slot

Averts his eyes

Then walks away

stop doing this to yourself

That same cadence

His reverberating footsteps correspond to

The cadence of my life.

More fun ensues

When you graduate to level 2

My deprivation extends from external to internal back to external

They tell me I am not allowed access

No newspapers

No magazines

Not even personal photographs

No radio nor television broadcasts

I'm not even allowed to maintain nor enhance competency

No chance for GED or Special ed. Courses

Instead I have the privilege to enjoy

Correspondences

Religious and legal materials

Even fictional books

crime and punishment

Limited writing paper ²⁷

Ready alternatives completely at my disposal

You see now more conflict ensues

Justices promulgate a new trifecta

Rationality, reasonableness, and logic²⁸

Operating under the notion that

Deprivation equates to rehabilitation

That, once you take these things away

The recalcitrant lot will behave

big brother is that you

think think

If you remove human contact

The master-slave dialect dissipates

But the removal of current reading materials

my last humanly privilege

reality is a myth

Ensures that no trace of my personhood can survive

Corrodes my identity

what personality

²⁷ Beard v Banks, 7

²⁸ Ibid., 5

Now I'm resigned to use the reading materials as projectiles

Make fires, and hide contraband²⁹

fulfill the statistic at whatever cost

My suffering irreversibly normalized

That is how decivilization works

It is a day

Did you hear that?

Scratch scratch scratch scratch scratch

That was the sound of my fingernails grating the cell wall

Excavating my life away

My inexorable urge to see any color but gray

The blood makes the pain appear less tangible

you are not alone

My only goal now to see the sky change color

Just to see the day turn to night

How do you pass the time when time never passes?

Desensitized to the smell of mildew and soap

Reminds me of the algae I customarily observe during courtyard recess

Wrought with delusions

Almost as if I were in a dream within a dream

Bifurcated into soulless iniquity

I can almost taste the nothingness

²⁹ Colin Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog*, 97

If there is one thing this cell taught me during my extensive stay

It is that death would be too easy of an escape

death be not proud³⁰

That I should not fear death by water³¹

sodium thiopental

pancuronium bromide

potassium chloride

It appears my eight-legged friend has returned

tip tap thump tip tap thump

Nothing cherished can stay

Tip tap thump tip tap

Eight goes to seven goes to three goes to

Tip tap..

good day

good night

good morrow

D.C. al Fine

³⁰ John Donne, "X," 1

³¹ Eliot, "The Waste Land," 55

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