

Metaphysical Hunger, the Radical Imagination and Richard Wright's
Emancipatory Project

By

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Introduction

“I stared at her and wondered just what a life like hers meant in the scheme of things, and I came to the conclusion that it meant absolutely nothing. And neither did my life mean anything,”¹ confesses Richard Wright in part two (“The Horror and the Glory”) of his autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. While the first part was published in 1945 following his monumental essay “Blueprint of Negro Writing”² and his best-selling novel *Native Son*³, both parts were first published together in 1991. In an intensely personal scene, Richard sits on the sofa of a “comely black housewife,”⁴ reading a book after sexual intercourse. It is 1927 and Richard is employed as an insurance salesman. His bewilderment comes after she admits “Naw, you know I can’t read.”⁵ The conversation grows more pained as Richard utters “I could kill you,”⁶ to which she responds “Kill me, you said? You crazy, man.”⁷ “Maybe I am,” I muttered, angry that I was sitting beside a human being to whom I could not talk, angry with myself for coming to her, hating my wild and restless loneliness.”⁸ Richard’s anger is not merely at his lover. Richard is angry at the structures which alienate and produce the “restless loneliness” he and many others struggle with. The absence of communication he finds in this scenario is another consequence of this system: her life is the product of a nation-state invested in denying her any other life.

¹ Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1945. Print. (341)

²Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1994): 97-106. Web. 14 June. 2016.

³ Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1940. Print.

⁴ Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1945. Print. (340)

⁵ *Ibid*, 340.

⁶ *Ibid*, 340.

⁷ *Ibid*, 340.

⁸ *Ibid*, 340.

This personal encounter, wrought with absence, is one moment of a series in *Black Boy (American Hunger)*; the private sphere functions in Wright’s memoir as a means to discuss the public inequities within the United States of America. Absence acts as a signifier of various realities, all which circulate around the dehumanization of citizens—the foremost being Black citizens. As the autobiography progresses, the absence of the “inexpressibly human,”⁹ including intimate connections, exemplary lives and emotional fulfilment, yields a hunger for a new way to live. An analysis of the final scenes within *Black Boy (American Hunger)* elucidates Richard Wright’s diagnosis of metaphysical hunger within the United States of America, in which the living consciousness—the radical imagination—arises out of it. Wright’s choice to produce an autobiography both exemplifies this imagination and illustrates the nation-building possibilities inherent within it. Richard Wright authors an interventionist text that can be read through the theories of precarity explored by Isabell Lorey and the theory of cruel optimism explored by Lauren Berlant. Wright’s emancipatory project presents a means to think about absence as power: from the margins come those who will reshape the nation. Ultimately, by recognizing the nationalist implications of Black lives, Wright calls for the development of an archive, which will intervene in the reproduction of violence in Black lives and generate a new legacy for the nation.

Those Who Hunger

The final scene of *Black Boy (American Hunger)* takes place after the May Day parade. “Well, what had I got out of living in the city?” the narrator asks, after losing the community he struggled to find. Richard arrived in Chicago not knowing what to expect. On his mind was his ability to survive and thrive in a mechanized city that he was continually astonished by. “What had I got out of living in the South?”¹⁰ In the South, Wright was given an education in survival, cruelty

⁹ Ibid, 453.

¹⁰ Ibid, 452.

and racial complexities. “What had I got out of living in America? I paced the floor, knowing that all I possessed were words and dim knowledge that my country had shown me no examples of how to live a human life.”¹¹ The Black boy from Mississippi who had burned a house down at age four had made it North, only to realize that racial inequities knew no bounds. Chicago, though of the “North,” was not much different from the stereotyped, racist South.

Richard arrived having had no sustained, substantial relationship with another human being and was at again alone. The John Reed Clubs, and in general the Communist Party, gave him limited care and welfare and soon became a site for Richard of feelings similar to those he felt in the South—the friends he made there were no longer friends, but people invested in a system and hierarchy which was disinvested in him. “All of my life I had been full of a hunger for a new way to live...”¹² This hunger, this hankering of Wright’s, speaks to a major absence. He names one façade of that reality: a lack of examples. He could see nowhere a self he wanted to be. No one he observed fought to live a different life, or imagined a different way of being. Though he is able to find and keep work in Chicago, complications arise in other aspects of his being. The final scene continues: “I heard a trolley lumbering past over steel tracks in the early dusk and I knew that underpaid, bewildered Black men and women were returning to their homes from serving their white masters.”¹³ Like him, there are many whose time in Chicago was filled with uninspiring employment. Did this make them employed, yet lonely too? Downtrodden emotionally, but physically fulfilled? Here, Wright is addressing the precariousness of the system in which he is functioning. The first chapter of *State of Insecurity*¹⁴, by political theorist Isabell Lorey, defines

¹¹ Ibid, 452.

¹² Ibid, 452.

¹³ Ibid, 452.

¹⁴ Lorey, Isabell, Aileen Derieg, Judith Butler, and Isabell Lorey. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

precarity as a “functional effect arising from the political and legal regulations that are specifically supposed to protect against general, existential precariousness.”¹⁵ The Black men and women Wright refers to are not the priority of the system in which they function. In fact, emotional dearth is a functional effect of the security provided by their jobs, for those who possess jobs.

Lorey continues: “From this perspective, domination means the attempt to safeguard some people from existential precariousness, while at the same time this privilege of protection is based on a differential distribution of the precarity of all those who are perceived as other and considered less worthy of protection.”¹⁶ Though slavery is abolished in 1865, and the full citizenship of African-Americans recognized in 1868 with the 14th amendment, these rights are seemingly regulated in order to protect the most “valuable” citizens: people who are White, or who have been made White. The irony here is that Wright’s epiphany about hierarchies and emotional death occurs on May Day, a day that is about claiming rights for the emergent subject. Instead, Wright is thrown out of the May Day parade by those who are more interested in his respect for the hierarchy than their mutual belief in destroying it.

The passage continues, as the narrator presents an image of intimate distance between these two seemingly separate sets of people: “In the front room of my apartment our radio was playing, pouring a white man’s voice into my home, a voice that hinted of a coming war that would consume millions of lives.”¹⁷ Lorey’s notion of domination applies both to Wright’s Black body in America, the working Black and White women he observes, and to the millions of lives mentioned by the White voice; as Othered bodies will fight to protect empires who abused their motherlands. Wright goes on to apply this idea of domination through built insecurity to all bodies,

¹⁵ Ibid, 22.

¹⁶ Ibid, 22.

¹⁷Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1945. Print. (453)

as the intimate distance becomes intimate peril: “Yes, the whites were as miserable as their Black victims, I thought. If this country can’t find its way to a human path, if it can’t inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, Black as well as white, are going down the same drain.”¹⁸ The choice to describe the necessary path as “human” indicates that the present path is one which divorces each and every person from their humanity.

Wright also locates emotional dissonance, a consequence of hunger, as a nation-wide problem, shifting ideas about regions and the operations of bodies within these spaces. Richard migrates from the South to the North, but this shift has not protected him from the emotional peril he faced in the South. Though White Americans are in a better position than Black people, emotional dearth is everywhere. “I picked up a pencil and held it over a sheet of white paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words.”¹⁹ Wright gestures towards the change that is possible; the food one finds to rectify hunger is words. Communication from one to another, through the image of a pencil in a *black* hand to *white* paper mimics the notion of two separate halves, uniting them in one possibility.

The conclusive sentence of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is animated, painting the picture of a man fighting for the world. “I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, no matter how faintly I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.”²⁰ Wright’s choice to use the term “the inexpressibly human,” again, is an important assertion, as the book, up until this point, has tracked the journey of a Black boy in America. The assertion is not merely that this Black boy is inexpressibly human, but that his

¹⁸ Ibid, 453.

¹⁹ Ibid, 453.

²⁰ Ibid, 453.

humanity speaks to the humanity of those all around, and can awaken what is asleep, revive that which is dying or create that which is absent. The word “darkness”²¹ is used to describe the outside world, exposing both its limitations and his own. It is in need of sight and so is he; by rectifying one problem, the other is also rectified. The use of the word “hunger” is interesting here, as throughout the text, it has been used to mark a dearth, but here it is marking a possibility. In fact, hunger is marked as the beginning of infinite possibilities. The answer to the issues that emerge as Wright lives in the two halves of the United States is not stability, but a steady hunger that begs to be fed with growth. This comes after the aforementioned image of a pencil held in his hand over “a white sheet of paper,”²² which is of no use to the author as his feelings stand in the way. Instead, he “would wait, day and night,”²³ “humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity,”²⁴ but in its place “build a bridge of words between me [himself] and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.”²⁵ Wright gestures from the margins, simultaneously gesturing to a radical imagination, one that is only available to those on the outside, or the ones who hunger.

Wright’s 1937 essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing”²⁶ takes up the notion of the radical imagination in terms of the nationalist implications of Black lives. “Let those who shy at the nationalist implications of Negro life look at this body of folklore, living and powerful, which rose out of a unified sense of a common life and a common faith.”²⁷ Nationalism, typically defined in relationship to hegemony, inhabits a different position here. Instead, it is used to denote power

²¹ Ibid, 453.

²² Ibid, 453.

²³ Ibid, 453.

²⁴ Ibid, 453.

²⁵ Ibid, 453.

²⁶ Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1994): 97-106. Web. 14 June. 2016.

²⁷ Ibid, 100.

grown from the outside position, maintained from the outside position. From the Black American tradition of folklore, Wright traces the “vital beginnings of a recognition of value in life as it is *lived*, a recognition that marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old.”²⁸ The hunger of the displaced for a history and culture has provided fertile ground for a philosophy and awareness of life as it is happening, not as it has been. The ramifications of this recognition become clear when Wright concludes “And at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a meaning in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.”²⁹ This philosophy and the lives of the marginal contain energy that can destroy and rebuild, rethink and reshape that which surrounds it. Wright’s gesture towards to the radical imagination from the margins is not new or individual but a historic reality, one that places the possible changes of the world outside within the margins of the excluded.

Wright begins “Blueprint for Negro Writing” by naming the roles of Black writing, the first being “conspicuous ornamentation or the ‘hallmark of achievement,’”³⁰ and the second “the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice.”³¹ These reasons are effectively destroyed with the final sentence of *Black Boy (American Hunger)* as Wright seats the power not in the external (in the white gaze or system) but within the body of the masses. “Blueprint for Negro Writing” continues:

Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must *possess* and *understand* it. And a nationalist spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest

²⁸ Ibid, 100.

²⁹ Ibid, 100.

³⁰ Ibid, 98.

³¹ Ibid, 98.

possible pitch of social consciousness. It means a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the dangers of its position; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies in the simple self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society.³²

What does it mean to accept the nationalist implications of one's life? A responsibility emerges, both to oneself and to one's nation, a responsibility that places immediate actions in full relation to one's neighbor and one's neighbor's neighbor. Black people also have a stake in America, to the point where their America, separate though it may be, is everyone's America. Wright's nationalism is not a nationalism which reiterates the separation Black Americans already face, nor further divorces them from others, positing them separate and better. Possessing and understanding this position will it mobilize it, awakening the social consciousness of all those who live in this America. Wright's nationalism inserts the experiences of those occupying the lowest rung into the national consciousness and, effectively, into modernity. Again, the insertion is not one that seeks to become whatever is already present, but is inherently a change agent. Blackness has a place, as do the experiences of those who have been alienated and nearly destroyed because of it. That place locates the nation as one deprived of the experiences of these citizens, and these citizens as those who can offer the nation the wisdom that has come from these experiences.

America

The final scene of *Black Boy (American Hunger)* registers the book as the collective realization of a man interested in ideology and nation-building. Cedric Robinson's pivotal text

³² Ibid, 100.

Black Marxism,³³ specifically the essay, “Richard Wright and the Critique of Class Theory,”³⁴ discusses Wright’s choice of language and communication as a tool to fight oppression. Wright posits communication as key several times in the final scene, specifically the images of the Black hand writing on white paper, building bridges and hurling words. Robinson claims that “His novels were consequently much more authentic documents than the conventional forms of history, biography and political tract for they were constructed from lives with which he was intimate.”³⁵ Richard Wright’s investment in the lives of the masses, and the substantial change that could come from them comes to mind here, as his texts follows most closely bodies on the ground, their formations and their positionalities. “In these novels, Wright could achieve his intention of weaving living consciousness into the impress of social theory and ideology.”³⁶

Living consciousness—hunger—is a dynamism which necessitates growth; one finds this evidenced in Wright’s thorough excavation of his relationship to communism. This begins with his visits to Washington Park, after collecting insurance premiums. He is prompted to find out what is happening after witnessing the lives and homes of his customers, finding pamphlets at his doorstep and hearing men on soapboxes preaching communism as he moves from work to home. He is alarmed at what he finds, as none of the public sermons seem thorough. There is an absence of deliberate thinking or thoughtful navigation of power. “Though they did not know it, they were naively practicing magic; they thought that if they acted like the men who had overthrown the czar, then surely they ought to be able to win their freedom in America.”³⁷ These are Black communists

³³ Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina, 2000. Print

³⁴ *Ibid*, 450.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 451.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 451.

³⁷ Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1945. Print. (437)

he refers to, who abandon their Black Americanness for the behaviors of men they do not know, and for a culture they are divorced from. Blackness, a site of great power, is evacuated. He details precisely how they go about functioning, or at best mimicking the foreigners. “‘Comrades’ became ‘cumrrrades,’ and ‘distribute,’ which they had known how to pronounce all their lives, was twisted into ‘distrribuuute,’ with the accent on the last instead of the second syllable, a mannerism they copied from Polish Community immigrants who did not know how to pronounce the word.”³⁸ An awareness is missing, of self and importance, and the significance of a self in America which knows all its sides.

This notion that the general and accepted ways of being in the world is the right way, the definitive way of being, frustrates Wright. What is evacuated when the experience and culture of Blackness is evacuated? What is lost? The possibility of change seems to be at the fore, as evacuating Blackness moves simultaneously with ballooning hegemonic infrastructures. By choosing to mimic white foreigners, the Black communists Wright describes choose to abandon the change they are capable of fomenting, and the inherent strength within their experiences.

The adapted physical habits culminate in ideas that cannot be translated undivided, that are fractured and incomplete. “When they walked, their stride quickened; all the peasant hesitancy of their speech vanished as their voices became terse, clipped.”³⁹ The “peasant hesitancy”⁴⁰ Wright speaks of is their connection with those whom they are speaking. If their power lies in their position, and the wisdom inherent in it, they have lost it. “In debate they interrupted their opponents in a tone of voice that was an octave higher, and if their opponents raised their voices to be heard, the Communists raised theirs still higher until shouts rang out over the park.”⁴¹ Though the point

³⁸ Ibid, 437.

³⁹ Ibid, 347.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 347.

⁴¹ Ibid, 347.

of these public presentations is to communicate, no communication is happening. They are speaking above and beyond those who are present, treating them with little respect and much condescension. In addition, these “communists” have little respect for the ideas they claim they know or the unity that was supposed to be enacted. “Hence, the only truth that prevailed was that which could be shouted and quickly understood.”⁴² Whatever truths those were, they were not as true as that which could have been explained in details and without haste. “I was now convinced that they did not know the complex nature of Negro life, did not know how great was the task to which they had set themselves.”⁴³ How could they when they avoided deliberate and thorough communication? How could they bring people in when they did not understand them? “They had rejected the state of things as they were, and that creative attitude toward life. I felt that it was not until one wanted the world to be different that one could look at the world with will and emotion.”⁴⁴ The men present did not seem to see the world, only their own anger. “But these men had rejected what was before their eyes without quite knowing what they had rejected and why.”⁴⁵

In contrast, Wright, through his many experiences, developed ideas from a place invested in difference, not merely a shift in power. “I felt that the Negro could not live a full, human life under the conditions imposed upon him by America; and I felt, too, that America, for different reasons, could not live a full, human life.”⁴⁶ What is accomplished through the contrast of Wright to other Black people, more specifically Black communists within this example? While they do not acknowledge and recognize their potential, Wright recognizes both his own, and theirs. Again, the experiences of Black people act as a mirror for America to see her flaws as the choice for

⁴² Ibid, 347.

⁴³ Ibid, 350.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 350.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 350.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 350.

Black citizens within America simultaneously emerges. One could be Wright or wrong, a thinking choosing person or a person who wished to be someone else, without this history. Mimicry is shallow. America, in its entirety, is also implicated. What could be resolved if the issue of Blacks in America was resolved? “It seemed to me, then, that if the Negro solved his problem, he would be solving infinitely more than his problem alone. I felt certain that the Negro could never solve his problem until the deeper problem of American civilization had been faced and solved.”⁴⁷ The interdependence of modern people emerges here. “And because the Negro was the most cast-out of all the outcast people in America, I felt that no other group in America could tackle this problem of what our American lives meant so well as the Negro could.”⁴⁸ Wright pinpoints the fact that there is no radical rethinking of processes or systems, but merely a copying of what has been done and what has been deemed correct. The discourse he witnesses is a hegemonic one, not one that unifies or educates. From this point, he concludes “Communism, instead of making them leap forward with fire in their hearts to become masters of ideas and life, had frozen them at an even lower level of ignorance than had been theirs before communism.”⁴⁹ The issue of systems is constantly deliberated here, as is the imagination that is capable of thinking past and through these systems.

Wright attempts to talk to White communists about the issues he faces with Black communists, but he fails equally. For example, he says,

I talked with white communists about my experiences with Black communists, and I could not make them understand what I was talking about. White communists idealized all Negroes to the extent that they did not see the same Negroes I saw.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 350.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 350.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 350.

And the more I tried to explain to my ideas the more they, too, began to suspect that I was somehow dreadfully wrong. Words lost their usual meanings. Simple motives took on sinister colors. Attitudes underwent quick and startling transformations. Ideas turned into their opposites while you were talking to a person you thought you knew. I began to feel an emotional isolation that I had not known in the depths of the hate-ridden South.⁵⁰

Whiteness is seemingly incapable of analyzing a raced body, outside of its relationship to itself. There is no truth that stands outside of Whiteness and Blackness and the dependent relationship between them. Whiteness depended on an empty Blackness to be full, and Wright calling this to the attention of his White colleagues did not shift this fact. In fact, this reality colored everything else as it took over the relationships he was in the process of building. Again, the racial hierarchies within America produced precarity; he was more alone after these “damaging” relationships than he had ever been without them.

Emancipation

Wright’s descriptions of average Americans invested in the limited conditions of possibility within their lives speaks to the theory of “cruel optimism”⁵¹ by Lauren Berlant. In excavating the relationship Black and White communists have to each other and their community, Wright touches the heart of America. Though they are in a modern city in the North, without overt racist moments and within an organization seemingly critical of America (and considered by many to be anti-American), the Communist Party too suffers from the great American disease. In describing the facts of cruel optimism, Berlant states,

⁵⁰ Ibid, 339.

⁵¹ Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011. Print.

‘Cruel Optimism’ names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. This phrase points to a condition different than that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject’s desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has identified her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss. One might point out that all the objects/scenes of desire are problematic, in that investments in them and projections onto them are less about them than about the cluster of desires and affects we manage to keep magnetized to them.⁵²

In excavating the relationship between Black communists and Polish communist immigrants, Wright hones in on a cruel attachment, a relationship connected to each identity’s being in the world. The Black communists evacuate Blackness while the Polish communists attempt to occupy Blackness, each reflecting the positions of powerlessness and power that they possess. Whiteness provided justification for being while occupying Blackness reiterates a history of domination and control. Wright’s gesture towards the radical imagination is relevant here, as it speaks to breaking down cruel attachments. A part of the writing radical imagination is one devoid of these attachments and an investment in a hierarchy of power. Each cruel investment allows those

⁵² Ibid, 21.

invested to avoid substantial pain and hold steadily to a version of optimism that is limited yet comforting.

Wright inadvertently proposes a means to think through cruel optimism, by way of the archive. Again, the philosophy and the lives of the marginal contain energy that can destroy and rebuild, rethink and reshape that which surrounds it. Within “Blueprint for Negro Writing” Wright states

It was, however, in a folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals and folktales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, to confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns—all these formed the channels through which racial wisdom flowed. One would have thought that Negro writers in the last century of striving at expression would have continued and deepened the folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication between them and their people. But the illusion that they could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of their race swung Negro writers away from such a path. Two separate cultures sprang up: one for the Negro masses, unwritten and unrecognized; and the other for the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered.⁵³

⁵³ Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1994): 99. Web. 14 June. 2016.

By tracing the divorce between Negro writers and their people, Wright speaks to the breakdown of an archive, specifically the oral tradition. The oral archive was readily accessible and filled with knowledge helpful to the community at large and to each specific person within the community. Accepted and appreciated ways of being were communicated, reflected and understood. Because it was not recorded and heralded by its artists, it failed to manifest into a material archive and, in turn, wisdom for the nation. What happens when archives are material and accessible? Scholar Katherine McKittrick's article "Mathematics Black Life"⁵⁴ provides a look into an alternate archive to explain the ways in which an existing and well-documented archive kills daily. She delves into the archive of the transatlantic slave trade to think through the Black body and the persistent economy of slavery.

The brutalities of transatlantic slavery, summed up in archival histories that give us a bit of (asterisked-violated) blackness, put meaningful demands on our scholarly and activist questions. While the tenets and the lingering histories of slavery and colonialism produced modernity as and with and through blackness, this sense of time-space is interrupted by a more weighty, and seemingly truthful (truthful and truth-telling because iterated as scientific, proven, certified, objective), underside-- where black is naturally malignant and therefore worthy of violation; where black is violated because black is naturally violent; where black is naturally unbelievable and is therefore naturally empty and violated; where black is naturally less-than-human and starving to death and violated; where black is naturally dysselected, unsurviving, swallowed up; where black is same and always and dead and dying; where black is complex and difficult and too much to bear and violated. The tolls

⁵⁴ Katherine McKittrick. "Mathematics Black Life." *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014): 16-28. Web.

of death and violence, housed in the archive, affirm black death. The tolls cast black as impossibly human and provide the conditions through which black history is currently told and studied. The death toll becomes the source.⁵⁵

The numerical slave archive reproduces itself in the school-to-prison pipeline and the prison industrial complex. In this way, the archive is both the afterlife and the life of Blackness, with the potential to murder people or present lives in total. The emancipatory project Richard Wright engages in is not merely about the immediate world, but about the world after. A Black artist recognizing the nationalist implication of their life does not only chance working at the problem of racism, but the nationwide hunger which reinforces such actions. In killing the comely housewife, Wright would not only be killing the very idea of her, but the systems which produce her. She is unable to read, support herself or attain substantial emotional connection. Instead, that is at the command of physical necessities she is struggling to maintain. This metaphorical death is a bridge to a better tomorrow, and a yesterday within full view of cruel attachments released to live a total life.

Conclusion

Within *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, Richard Wright asserts that his humanity, and the humanity of many downtrodden Black Americans like him, speaks to the humanity of those all around, more specifically White Americans in America writ large. Moreover, the consciousness embedded in his humanity, and those like him, births a living consciousness. Richard Wright's 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing,"⁵⁶ ponders living consciousness through the concept of the radical imagination. The nationalist implications of Black lives are discussed as nationalism,

⁵⁵ Ibid, 20.

⁵⁶ Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (1994): 97-106. Web. 14 June. 2016.

typically defined in relationship to hegemony, is used to designate power cultivated and maintained from the periphery. Wright uses the Black American tradition of folklore to trace this awareness—of life as it is being lived *in the peripheries*. Wright's choice of language and communication as a tool to fight oppression epitomizes his investment in the lives of the masses, and the substantial change that can come from them. His texts chart bodies in the peripheries, their developments and their positionalities.

Wright's examination of his relationship to communism confirms the growth necessitated by living consciousness through hunger. The implication is that by resolving racism, the ultimate issue of human hunger can also be resolved. Wright pinpoints the fact that with no imagination capable of thinking past and through these systems, no radical remaking of processes or systems can take place. The question of killing the comely housewife is the question of killing the system. Wright's gesture towards the radical imagination speaks to annihilating cruel attachments. The writing on radical imagination is marked by an absence of these attachments and an investment in a hierarchy of power.

Wright involuntarily proposes a means to think through cruel optimism and past hegemonic systems by way of the archive. The philosophy and the lives of the marginal contain energy that can destroy and rebuild, rethink and reshape that which surround it. Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* deliberates the positionality of Blackness within the realm of the nation. A radical imagination, stemming from the experiences of those outside the hegemonic structure, proves to be the way to construct an improved, changed nation. By applying the theories of Isabell Lorey and Lauren Berlant to *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, one is able to understand the consequences of the lives Wright describes and the need to change the very foundation that engenders them. Hunger within Wright's text comes to signify absence, and leads to possibility. From the minds

and experiences of the hungry come the knowledge which can be used to change America and systems which contort its citizens into emotionally desolate citizens.

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