OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This project connects the literary work of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright to contemporary conversations about white supremacy in black intellectual scholarship. The conversations raise issues of pessimism and optimism with respect to the possibility addressing racial injustice and inequality within the United States, and depth anti-black racism within American institutions, cultures and practices. These debates rearticulate James Baldwin's question, "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?" This project seeks to connect Baldwin's question to his literary influences in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as well as contemporary scholarship engaging this question, particularly Cornell West's "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization" and Frank B. Wilderson III's “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?”
This thesis and research within it is dedicated to various colleagues and fellow students who supported it's production both intellectually and emotionally, including Dominique Nicole Swann, Whitney Williams, Amy Lee, Colin Dwyer and Jay Mahan. My undergraduate mentor, Dr. Tweedy affirmed my ambition to become a scholar and educator, and instilled in me a sense of direction and motivation that has driven me in my studies and growth as a black man. Throughout the entirety of my education and my life I have been supported, both financially and emotionally by parents, Ann and Andy Taylor, and my sister Tawanna Taylor. I must credit “the boys of Preston Court,” Matti Worku, Christopher Lopez, and Christopher Walker, as they have not only been alive in my memories, but have animated my curiosity and drive as a graduate student. This work is also heavily inspired by countless activists and organizations who influenced its direction. Finally, I must thank Dr. Schwarz and Dr. Patterson, who have given guidance in both personal and academic contexts, been extremely patient, and pushed me to think energetically about the scholarship I engaged and created.

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Introduction

At the heart of the discourses and practices concerning African American culture is a tension. Countless authors and scholars have attempted to articulate and define this tension throughout the history of African American cultural production. The tension reaches a unique moment of clarity within James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time" as he poses the question: "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?"

Baldwin's question, whether rhetorical or sincere, calls attention to the nature of racism and white supremacy. The image of a burning house suggests that there is something unethical within American civil society beyond the institution of Jim Crow, and that Jim Crow is in fact a symptom of a larger problem at the level of discourse, meaning, and perhaps ontology. Baldwin urges America to realize that racism is not an accidental feature of law or culture, but is in fact a structuring principle of every element of American society.

This insight constitutes a tension as it complicates the political struggle against racial inequality and injustice. If racism is deeper than any particular political institution, then what can protest or legislation aimed at such institutions accomplish? Furthermore, what would a political reformation not of institutions but of discourse (or even more perplexing, ontology) look like? Strangely enough, Baldwin's question is haunted by specters of both optimism and pessimism. The optimist invokes the possibility of salvaging a civilization blazing with flames of injustice that burn through its deepest structure, while the pessimist attends to the possibility that such flames may indeed be "The Fire Next Time" needed to end injustice.

Baldwin himself is clearly aligned with the optimistic energy that his question provokes, as his essay contains a call to action for Americans on both sides of the color line to avoid the biblical apocalypse that would result from continuing racial strife. But his optimism is not
universal across intellectual and artistic thought in black America. As early as Marcus Garvey, African Americans have seriously entertained the impossibility of justice, success, and survival within the society of the United States. The various periods of African American literature each pose their own relationship to the dilemma articulated by Baldwin, ranging from the Harlem Renaissance's hope of creating a blackness that might find its place within the American cultural landscape to the Black Arts Movement's disavowal of all things Eurocentric and white.

The question itself has evolved at various moments, influenced by the reigning "black zeitgeist" of the moment. The various attempts to address Baldwin's concern during the Civil Rights Movement would foreground the hopeful response, while the same consideration during the Black Power era would emphasize the need for new institutions that focus on black needs, implying that America's current institutions could never attend to these needs. As the academy opened its doors to the margins, to those excluded by history, African American scholars pursued more theoretical and scholarly approaches to this question. Armed with concepts and frameworks from philosophy and sociology, the answers to the question gained a strategic dimension. Scholars could now use a wide variety of tools, and locate different contexts to substantiate their claims about the possibility of racial justice in the United States.

It is generally assumed, however, that the answers to the question lean towards optimism in light of the development in methods to address the question. Mainstream politics and culture remains unaware, for the most part, of the growing scholarship in both directions, toward the possibility of salvaging a burning house and toward the realization that justice may require letting it dis(-)integrate. This project is an exploration of the ways in which these divergent responses to the question find their roots in earlier attempts at grappling with the question at
different levels of utterability. It is my hope to look for manifestations of this divergence in literary work prior to Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time."

In the past decade, a group of theorists, critics, and scholars working within African American studies have formed an especially negative theoretical response to this question. Calling themselves "afro-pessimists," these thinkers are no longer content with identifying conflicts between African Americans and others in society. Rather, these thinkers prefer to identify anti-black racism within the United States as an antagonism, an inherent rather than contingent part of the experience of the African American subject position within civil society. Unlike a conflict, an antagonism cannot be resolved without dismantling the structure that positions the antagonism, in this case American civil society.

**Afro-pessimism**

Frank Wilderson, a film critic, creative writer, and critical theorist stands as a leader in this genre of social and critical theory. Wilderson draws on Orlando Patterson’s two conclusions about the consequences of slavery upon African American subjectivity. First, Patterson argues that African Americans experience natal alienation, the inability to use community memory or the experience of ancestors to inform the present and ground a social reality (5). The violence of slavery severed African Americans from their cultural practices. Hence, they lack certain traits of other groups such as an access to an indigenous history, a condition for a cultural understanding and framing of material and social realities. Wilderson extends this analysis in the claim that African Americans occupy a uniquely disadvantaged position in America because they lack authenticators of humanity-- cultural codes such as rights and entitlements, sovereignty, and narratives of arrival to America—that other minority groups within America (Native American, Latino, Asian, etc.) have (in Wilderson’s own register, the slave trade transformed Africans into blacks) (“Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” 236-237).
Second, Patterson argues that African Americans experience social death as a consequence of natal alienation. Because African lost access to culture, history, etc. through the violence of slavery they were denied the “being” of non-black entities and were understood by that lack of being (38-39). Wilderson and Patterson emphasize the role that cultural practices, language, and values play in constituting both subjectivity and agency. Patterson differentiates between two processes of social death, intrusive and extrusive. Intrusive social death involves framing a slave as an external threat made internal. Extrusive social death involves an internal presence that has fallen from humanity that while not “guilty,” is still understood as incapable of preventing the fall into slavery. From the perspective of chattel slavery in America, the concept of the intrusive slave elaborates the African American subject as a wild and dangerous African presence that threatens society if not subdued and controlled through slavery (39-40).

It should be noted that Wilderson's use of the term "slave" to refer to African Americans is not a simplification of the differences between chattel slavery and African American experiences in the twenty first century, but is rather an ontological claim. Slavery, for Wilderson, is a relationship to violence intrinsic to blackness, as opposes to the condition of being the "human property" of another (an experience which Wilderson admits is possible for anybody regardless of race)Wilderson explains that violence towards black people within American civil society is "ontological and gratuitous" (Gramsci's Black Marx 229). First, that violence towards African Americans "is the precondition for the existence" of American civil society and of notions such as humanity, citizen, etc. this formulation sets blackness in opposition to humanity. Second, this violence is gratuitous, or lacking what one might call material explanation. Whereas the transgressions experienced by workers in a capitalist setting (unbearable conditions, loss of the fruits of labor, etc.) are explained by the generation of economic profit for the capitalist, it is
difficult to say what is gained by something like the prison industrial complex, where more debt is incurred than reduced from the labor produced by disproportionately black prisoners. Similarly, in cases of police shooting like Ramarley Graham, Sean Bell, and Amadou Diallo, it is difficult to point to a material incentive or motivation for these incidents. When compounded, these two points, the first as ontological and second as gratuitous, imply that violence toward black bodies within civil society differs from violence toward other oppressed groups (other non-white races, working class people, etc.) in that there is a psychic, or what Wilderson and other afro-pessimists call "libidinal," incentive at the core of the violence and its perpetuation. In maintaining and enforcing a black/white binary, civil society and its human (or in Wilderson's formulation, non-black) members of society gain a sense of coherence and stability on a psychological level. Hence, the moment where civil society is established through the violent act of slavery is not a historical incident. Rather, civil society functions according to a logic of anti-blackness that continue to function in the present.

Wilderson contends that this Anti-blackness is at the heart of American institutions, even within those who are “sympathetic” to blackness. Wilderson looks to the work of Antonio Gramsci as an example of a leftist emancipatory discourse that seeks to explain alienation and exploitation. Noting that Gramsci explains oppression not as an instance of coercion or use of force, but as a use of hegemony, where institutions, norms, and apparatuses normalize oppression such that force and coercion are not necessary, Wilderson claims that this framing does not account for forceful and coercive act of enslaving Africans (Gramsci’s Black Marx...228-229). This shortcoming renders the structures of anti-blackness invisible, and ensures that revolutions and politics that rely upon Gramsci’s framework will replicate anti-blackness. Furthermore, violence towards black subjects is better explained through a rubric of
accumulation and fungibility. Accumulation differs from exploitation, as accumulating black bodies does not imply a rational gain of capital. Wilderson contends that the slave trade was not the most economic option for free labor (noting that enslaving Europeans would have been cheaper) (*Red, White & Black* 13-14). Fungibility differs from alienation in that instead of lacking a familiarity with life or society, black subjects are appropriated for the uses of others. Wilderson particularly notes that emancipatory discourses use the metaphor of an entity denied freedom (the slave) to motivate and explicate political projects (such as feminist aims for freedom from gender roles and gendered violence, and Marxist goals for freedom from economic injustice) and that such discourses use the slave as a vehicle for exercising political agency (the pursuit of abolition provides a mode of expression of freedom for the activist just as much as it pursues the freedom of the slave) (*Red, White & Black* 23-24).

Wilderson goes through the labor of elaborating this framework of anti-blackness for two particular reasons. First, illuminating the function of anti-blackness is necessary to reveal how deeply embedded it is in civil society, and to highlight the ways that Marxism and other leftist discourses are misguided in targeting capitalism and other structures of oppression as contingent facts of civil society. Second, Wilderson's theoretical exposition reveals the way that leftist discourses not only misunderstand racism, but also benefit from anti-blackness. These discourses are guilty of appropriating the conditions of African Americans for their particular causes, using the situation of black people within civil society as a podium upon which to further their own ends, rendering black people fungible by appropriating them for their own narratives and denying blacks the right to articulate their own. Additionally, leftist discourses are unable to realize that using the metaphor of slavery to make their own political demands legible eliminates the only language to speak to the ontological condition of slavery. Because slavery is now a
rhetorical move used to clarify the political demands of various groups, it makes the presence of slavery within the present unthinkable and invisible.

**West's opposition**

Afro-pessimists argue that at various moments within the twentieth century, black intellectuals have experienced moments of realization of the deep structures of anti-blackness within civil society and the impossibility of saving the house of civil society without preserving its racial antagonisms. Wilderson particularly looks to Baldwin's "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* as evidence of an exhaustion with the rhetoric of hope within "The Fire Next Time" (*Red, White & Black* 11-12). Needless to say, one of the tasks for Wilderson and other afro-pessimists is not only to reveal a shift away from this hope within history, but also to articulate the shortcomings in these hopes within the present. These artists, scholars, and intellectuals who posit strategies of recoverability and reconciliation for blackness with civil society have been colloquially referred to as afro-optimists. Afro-optimists are not a self recognized group (in fact, many of them are likely to be unconcerned with the dichotomy of pessimism and optimism, believing that optimism is the correct orientation and instead focusing on issues of method, strategy, etc.) and interactions between afro-optimists and afro-pessimists are difficult to track. Wilderson does relate his work to one hopeful scholar in particular, as a way of revealing that even optimistic approaches to the situation of African Americans must grapple with the issue of anti-blackness. It is necessary to explore the exact common ground between Wilderson on the one hand, and Cornel West on the other, particularly in West's essay "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization":

[America’s] unrelenting assault on black humanity produced the fundamental condition of black culture — that of black invisibility and namelessness. On the crucial existential level relating to black invisibility and namelessness, the first difficult challenge and demanding
discipline is to ward off madness and discredit suicide as a desirable option. A central preoccupation of black culture is that of confronting candidly the ontological wounds, psychic scars, and existential bruises of black people while fending off insanity and self-annihilation. This is why the ‘ur-text’ of black culture is neither a word nor a book, not an architectural monument or a legal brief. Instead, it is a guttural cry and a wrenching moan — a cry not so much for help as for home, a moan less out of complaint than for recognition. (1996, pp. 80–81).

This quote does suggest that Wilderson has found an unlikely supporter for his theories. West is known as an opponent of capitalism, a supporter of multicultural and democratic struggle and a radical leftist (he was a common commentator and proponent of the Occupy movement during its prominence). His concepts here of "invisibility" and "namelessness" seem to work well with Wilderson's notions of social death, gratuitous violence, and slavery as ontology. However, West actually makes an opposing claim within this essay; While social death and gratuitous violence are obstacles to the liberation of African Americans, West contends that black culture and the artifacts that it produces serve the purpose of "confronting" ontological and existential wounds and "fending off insanity and self-annihilation."

West certainly agrees that African Americans face violence at a deeper level than contingent acts of physical violence or even economic acts of exploitation and alienation. In *Race Matters*, West discusses the "nihilistic threat," which he defines as "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness," as the most significant threat to African American communities and individuals (22-23). He emphasizes that while it should not absolve African Americans of responsibility for moral failures and criminal activity, an understanding of phenomena such as high crime rates in primarily black communities should account for the nihilistic threat as a factor (*Race Matters* 25). West's diverse intellectual influences are obvious here. He is committed to affirming the agency of African Americans from a philosophical and perhaps even theological perspective, but
is unwilling to think of the individual in a vacuum, separated from history and the environment.

For West, African Americans should indeed be accountable to moral codes and laws, but the institutions should also be aware of the racial turmoil within America as a unique burden contributing to what is often referred to as "the problem of black America."

Drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois among others, West elaborates that both liberals and conservatives have always viewed black people as a "problem people" in the words of Dorothy Height.

...for liberals, black people are to be "included" and "integrated" into "our" society and culture, while for conservatives they are to be "well behaved" and "worthy of acceptance" by "our" way of life. Both fail to see that the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather constitutive elements of that life (Race Matters 6).

Here, West implies that blackness has always been the domain of another's agency. Similar to Wilderson, West identifies this usurpation of agency as an inherent aspect of America. Although he does not say it explicitly, West establishes the premises for the conclusion that the nihilism and lack of self-determination of black America are not only profitable for white America, but its necessary condition. He meets Wilderson at this point, locating anti-black structures of agency and identity at the heart of America, and demonstrating that these structures still shape the political terrain of the present

Unlike Wilderson and Patterson, West argues that black culture exists, and that it has served vital purposes. He argues against the thesis of natal alienation by explaining that African Americans have maintained certain African cultural features, specifically "kinetic orality, passionate physicality, improvisational intellectuality, and combative spirituality" ("Black Strivings" 80). While the ur-text of black culture may not be a tangible text but a guttural cry (a reference possibly drawn from the work Aime Cesaire), West argues that black culture, at its
best, transfigures and transforms that cry into an "existential arsenal" that simultaneously expresses "the profoundly tragicomic character of black life" and generates "creative ways of fashioning power and strength..." ("Black Strivings" 81-82). West contends that black culture generates community, agency, and identity in a society that would deny African Americans these anchors of humanity. West finds examples of these cultural moments and practices within the arts, music, and especially literature.

Ultimately, West contends that the survival of African American people despite an American culture invested in their spiritual, political and economic disenfranchisement is a testament to the cultural leaders who have "creat[ed] powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat" and "equipp[ed] black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness" (Race Matters 23). West remarks that "the shattering of black civil society" is a consequence of "the saturation of market forces and market moralities in black life and the present crisis in black leadership" (23). While West is publically an advocate for movements against capitalism, such as the Occupy movement, he remains critical of marxism for its reliance of notions of determinism and explicit structural critique that overlook a cultural and social dimension to the analysis of racial inequality (18-19). West contends that attention towards material inequality must be combined with an ethic of care and love in the face of a "nihilistic threat," which in the current moment "seems insurmountable" (30). such an approach favors a pluralism, "incorporating the best of black nationalist movements, the perennial hope against hope for transracial coalition in progressive movements, and the painful struggle for self affirming sanity" (30).

**Dialoguing opposition**

West and Wilderson share three particular contentions on the nature of anti-blackness within civil society. First, both scholars agree that civil society situates blackness in a position
that is subhuman, compounding the damage done to cultural identity through the legacy of slavery (what West calls homelessness and namelessness and Wilderson calls social death) with positioning blackness as a negation (what some scholars have referred to as metaphysical blackness). Second, West and Wilderson locate anti-black racism at deep psychological level such that it is not explainable or visible through theories of value and exploitation found within marxism (West notes that this is the shortcoming of a marxist determinism, whereas Wilderson locates a more primal economy, libidinal economy, that precedes political economy). Finally, the two scholars describe the ways in which whiteness benefits, often obliviously, from the structures of anti-blackness; West points to the ways that both republicans and democrats are able to isolate black people (homogenously) as a problem people, implying that "white is normal and neutral," which compliments Wilderson's poststructural account of the negation of blackness as the clearing for a "full" white presence. Despite agreeing on these issues, the scholars end up in very different positions politically. West argues that market values have impeded the recuperative function of black culture, and that attention to corporate capitalism from a race conscious socialist perspective (West often alludes to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1966 conversion to a more global analysis of inequality) would allow black culture reinvigorate that life sustaining impulse. Wilderson, on the other hand, believes that natal alienation has disrupted black culture to such a degree that it cannot assert or express itself within civil society, and that the accumulation and fungibility of blackness ensure that racial solidarity will always reify whiteness libidinally while it aids blackness economically or socially.

I argue that this juncture demonstrates the opposing responses to Baldwin's dilemma of the burning house, specifically the developed theoretical rigor within the two positions. The surprising common ground between West and Wilderson can be understood as rooted in a vast
intellectual tradition within what might be called "Africana thought" within many different interacting disciplines. As stated earlier, the roots of this conversation begin in literary works, with Baldwin as something of a benchmark in the development of the question of anti-blackness.

Interestingly enough, the two authors of "canonical" fame that precede Baldwin, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, can be positioned within these positions on anti-blackness. Wright's use of realism and naturalism to depict the brutal conditions of black life has inspired analyses of black pathology. Unsurprisingly, Frantz Fanon (who Wilderson identifies as the "proto-afro-pessimist") refers to Wright's *Native Son* to illustrate the untenable position of blackness within civil society. Ellison himself notes that *Invisible Man* is an attempt to break with the naturalist tradition, as "the very facts which the naturalists assumed would make us free have lost the power to protect us from despair" ("Brave Words for a Startling Occasion" 103). His discussion of experimentalism, democracy, and hope foreshadow his later emphasis on jazz and improvisation as political metaphors. His emphasis on musical tradition, building on what came before, playing with a group in cooperation, and the energy and creativity involved in this process resonate so clearly with West's ideas that one must recognize that West is indeed influenced by Ellison (and perhaps, the two are in dialogue with one another not necessarily directly but through this musical tradition and its impact upon intellectual and literary production).

This project is an examination of this dialogue, and its progression from literary influence and thematics to political scholarship. I intend to use this conversation between West and Wilderson, along with the pessimist/optimist tension, as lens for exploring Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* for early engagements with the Baldwin's dilemma. In political terms, one might frame this debate as a question of the possibility of black cultural production to
work with progressive democratic politics towards the goal of liberation, or whether a more radical alternative, such as Wilderson's disavowal of civil society is necessary.

One difficulty in constructing a scholarly dialogue between West and Wilderson is that the two approach similar topics from very different academic training and techniques. Fred Moten, a theorist who engages and similarly applies both psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories to the question of blackness as dereliction (arriving at a less polemical conclusion than Wilderson), notes that Fanon and the scholars who position him within afro-pessimism tend to conflate the "fact" of blackness, and the "lived experience" of blackness (179-180). Moten describes the fact of blackness as the configuration of blackness within white discourses, that position it as a non-identity; because of the normative position of these discourses within American society, this discursive positioning is an ontological positioning as well. This position is distinct from the lived experience of blackness, which refers to the experience, the way of being a subject/body that is position configured by normative discourse as dereliction. Moten contends that the space between the "fact" of blackness and the "lived experience" of blackness creates a space for what he calls "fugitive movement," which generates a type of agency outside of normative discourses (179).

This project is concerned, in many ways with the productivity of fugitive movement. Scholarship strongly suggests that Wright and Ellison have clear and distinct personal positions on the question of agency within structures of anti-blackness, as critics tend to agree that Wright's naturalism depicts a black population forced into deplorable habits and lifestyles by material conditions, whereas Ellison champions American notions of individuality and freedom. My contention is that even if the author's criticism and other works completely affirm this dichotomy (I will point to specific moments that suggest otherwise), *Native Son* and *Invisible
Man are such complex works of literary fiction that they preserve the artistic function of raising unsettling questions, which Baldwin notes as the separating characteristic between literature and social documentary ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 152-153). These three authors emerge in a break between the Harlem and New Negro Renaissances on one hand and the Black Arts movement on the other, and are writing during the development of both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (opposing political responses to Baldwin's dilemma). This context, along with the fact that each author has a history with some form of anti-capitalist left within the United States, suggests that despite their various dispositions toward political organizations and America as a nation, the authors write as way to express the difficulties and contingencies of black politics and identification with America.

A literary intervention

An obvious question is "why is literature a good place for such an investigation?” I look to the specific literature in the twentieth century as it marks a concern with joint concern with both politics and aesthetics. In many places, West explains the significance of many of these texts to the African American literary tradition, and to the political culture of race in America writ large. Additionally, Henry Louis Gates mentions in the essay "Parable of the Talents," that while there is a popular idea that black cultural production is successful because of its access to black dispossession and disaffection as the lifeblood of artistic and intellectual work, such an idea is probably indebted to the same "problem people" mentality that sees black people as appendages to America. Gates contends that black culture occupies the position of cutting edge and influential work as a general rule as opposed to an occasional incident, suggesting that the need to negotiate the meaning of blackness plays a role in its significance("Parable of the Talents" 38-39). Interestingly enough, Gates draws attention to the way that African American artistic production from the first half of the twentieth century addresses the idea of rootlessness in a
sustained way, whereas later (and earlier) moments in the tradition attempt, for better or worse, at establishing a stable African American identity against the possibility of cultural rootlessness ("Parable of the Talents" 42-43).

Abdul JanMohamed posits that literary analysis allows access to the process through which subjectivities are formed both through subjugation and subjectification, and that specifically within the African American literary tradition there is a transformation from impersonal to subjective accounts of the role of violence and death in the making of subjects (4). Additionally, he notes that within this gradual shift, Wright serves as a median point and Morrison indicates a climax (4). It is interesting that the latter half of such a trajectory would be the exact domain that West praises as the formation of cultural fortification against the absurd realities of white supremacy. A literary analysis then, is an inquiry into the latter half of this "subjective" turn. Other literary critics, such as Gates and Houston Baker, establish concepts of revolutionary and powerful consciousness that originate in African American literature, such as Gates' musical "superconsciousness" and Baker's "black (w)holes." Both of these concepts are attempts at positing a unique element of African American literature (and by extension African American culture) that relies upon a subjectivity disrupted, both materially and discursively by white society. A question that this project seeks to answer is whether or not these elements empower black subjectivity towards radical reconfigurations of civil society, or are limited to identifying the limitations of civil society all together.

Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* elaborates a cultural framework within American culture that positions blackness as essential to an American identity, particularly in the notion of an Africanist presence that must be conquered by a pioneering and free (white) citizen. Such an analysis of the trope of both Africanism and citizen is useful beyond the texts that Morrison
investigates. The literary texts within this project will obviously invoke these tropes; however, given the way that the two tropes form an opposition at the foundation of American culture, these texts provide an insight not only to political reconfigurations of America, but discursive and ontological reconfigurations through their interrogation of the opposition between the citizen and the Africanist presence. This project is concerned with the interactions between fugitive movements, such as those explored by Gates and Baker, and these racial structures represented within American literature.

Wright, in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," performs an inventory of the various forces that compelled him within the writing of *Native Son*, including those that compelled him to write as well as those that impeded the process. Specifically he mentions his affiliations with the Communist party, who would denounce his depictions of African American life and race relations as confusing and dangerous with respect to a political movement with clear and narrow goals (448-449). This, along with the reoccurring question, "how will whites respond to these representations?" presents a moment where the narratives take on particular political functions. The moments that shock, disturb, or otherwise discomfort readers are working not only on the emotional level of the reader, but to the symbolic and civil orders of readership as well. For example, the ending scene of *Native Son*, where Max and Bigger appear to be in different places with respect to the situation, marks a place of antagonism, represented by respective illegibility between the two characters. Wright's ultimate decision to disavow the need to affirm the reader's sense of the world marks not only a political act upon a literary community, but also a rhetorical act of Wright himself, as he configures his own freedom in a fugitive movement.

One of the more valuable insights offered by this project is a contextualization of current discussions of black pathology and cultural resistance within literary intellectual productions.
West, Wilderson, and Moten are African American scholars of a certain moment and persuasion. They are all determined to ground scholarship in political issues, and demonstrate a blend of literary and creative voice within theoretical scholarship. The implications of this latter observation potentially offer evidence to either the pessimistic or optimistic response to Baldwin's dilemma. More importantly, however, this impulse to blend artistic, intellectual, and political work points to the ways that these scholars, and the countless other scholars engaged in the same or similar issues of comparable orientations, are always already informed and situated within the literary initiations of Africana thought. One consequence of this is that despite Wilderson's provocative rhetoric demanding for the end of civil society, it is only unprecedented in terms of its engagement with critical theory as a mode of explication and the rhetoric such an engagement permits (slavery as ontology and as a way of being for example). Furthermore, in many ways, West's explication of the political and social impact of black culture illuminates his own conditions of possibility as a scholar. In demonstrating that the theories posed by West and Wilderson have existed prior to their articulations, this project reveals a continuity that validates the theories as a well as hazard in their marginal position with respect to mainstream political discourse.

Beginning with Wright's *Native Son*, I'm interested in the way that Bigger's existence is incompatible with the institutions around him and the white subjects that both support and rely upon these institutions. While it is easy to call attention to the moments in the text where police brutality or opportunistic tokenism clearly validate the theory of afro-pessimism, more interesting and fraught with complication are the quotidian moments where "sympathetic" white subjects attempt to make meaningful human contact with Bigger. Perhaps the most interesting of these moments occurs towards the end, where Bigger's conversations with Max fall apart, and
the two, after engaging in multiple attempts where Max tries to see Bigger from Bigger's own account of himself, separate on an uncertain terrain. Additionally, the moments of violence on Bigger's behalf provide insight into what a violent disavowal and destruction of civil society might be; the animating question here is whether or not Bigger Thomas (in a different, more motivated scene that is not provided within the text) occupies a subject position capable of dismantling the white institutions that deny him a full subjectivity.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* offers a different insight into black subjectivity, particularly its status with respect to the rest of society. *Invisible Man* has inspired many sociological inquiries into the nature of blackness, as the hyper-visibility of black skin provides legibility to a disenfranchised and abject "black presence" that renders black humanity invisible. Such invisibility could potentially become the condition for a type of seeing without being seen, and provide an opportunity for a type of hyper-exposure to the inner workings of the world that white subjects have created but can scarcely understand. This position might prove useful in coalitional politics aimed at social change. However, if the position of knowledge from an underground, unseen position, (an idea elucidated in part by Baker's notion of "black (w)holes") cannot provide legibility to the subject that possesses it, it cannot escape the status of "a being for another."

It is my hope that this project begins a necessary dialogue on an issue that has been approached from various perspectives, and that it generates a vocabulary that not only clarifies ongoing conversations on the literary texts in question, but that the vocabulary of such a dialogue might also find a use in more contemporary cultural discourse and criticism. The tensions presented in these texts are not merely expressive and historical occurrences but have managed to endure time and disseminate broadly into contemporary culture.
Richard Wright's *Native Son*

The common starting point in criticism and reviews of Richard Wright's *Native Son* is that the murder of Mary Dalton is an act of agency for Bigger Thomas. The justifications for this are evident throughout the text, and there is not much controversy over the claim that Bigger's murder gives him a sense of responsibility and actualization for his own life that the structure of white supremacy (along with its complementing structure, capitalism) denies him. Reading the novel usually emphasizes the naturalist elements of Wright's fiction, particularly its role in illuminating the dark realities of black life. Whether or not all critics agree with the total function of the novel as a social commentary aimed at inspiring protest, Wright's background and the common representation of Wright as solely a protest author make this reading a necessary issue to address, so much so that it is conducive to center a work of criticism around the agency within Bigger's "murder."

From that point, the debate about the implications of Bigger's "humanizing murder" range in a variety of directions. In one of the more popular and canonical criticisms of the novel, "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin argues that the Bigger's murder and rape are extensions of the hatred and fear that maintain a deterministic grip upon his life. Baldwin's larger contention about the novel's politics positions Wright within a protest tradition that, for Baldwin, is more about sentimental and emotional appeal that political practice centered in conscious activity. This position influences the widespread treatment of Wright's work as naturalist and protest fiction, and its evaluation as propagandistic, overly political, and more social commentary than literary art. There is little discussion of the strong reaction to this evaluation from other critics. Donald Gibson argues that critics often fail to see Bigger in ways that mirror Bigger's invisibility or illegibility from the perspective of white society, especially as critics
ignore Bigger's capacity for individual agency within the vicissitudes of inner city Chicago ("Wright's Invisible Native Son" 75). Interestingly enough, this inability to perceive Bigger's fugitive action could either suggest that these scholars are complicit in a form of anti-blackness that denies the productive capacity of black individual struggle or that black individual struggle is too feeble and confined by civil society to be an effective form of resistance. Paul Siegel similarly argues that the conclusion of the novel is complicated, since despite Max's dominant presence in the culminating events of the book with his long and perhaps "over done" explication of the social inequities that affect Bigger, Bigger receives the last word and ultimately impacts Max in interesting ways. Siegel states that Bigger and Max represent two competing political strategies at the end of the novel, with Bigger's acceptance of his position as a form of individual and personal action and Max's focus upon social change at the level of societal organization ("The Conclusion of Richard Wright's Native Son" 94). This divide in strategy also illustrates Moten's separation between "the fact" and "the lived experience" of blackness and demonstrates how contemporary insights on black political action and agency are rooted in conversations within and around Native Son.

Wright's novel follows Bigger Thomas, a young black man living in Chicago with his family in the impoverished conditions that civil society establishes as suitable for black life. Bigger receives a job as a chauffeur for the Daltons, an affluent family with a husband and father, Mr. Dalton, who owns a great deal of property, including the apartment complex where Bigger's family lives. His daughter, Mary Dalton is popular for her status as a Dalton and rebellious in her affiliations with communists. When Bigger drives Mary to a lecture at a university, Jan, a communist and courter of Mary, joins the two, and Bigger is forced to socialize with white people. Bigger is uncomfortable in this position, as whiteness appears to him as a
policing force that degrades him and determines his life's possibilities. During this venture, Mary and Jan drink heavily, and Bigger must guide her into her bedroom upon returning the Dalton's residence at a very late hour of the morning. While the two are in Mary's bedroom, Mrs. Dalton enters. Mrs. Dalton is blind, and unable to see Bigger; nonetheless, Bigger covers Mary's mouth to prevent her from alerting Mrs. Dalton as to his presence in the room, afraid that he would be accused of having sexual relations with Mary, which in the setting of the novel, would have lead to serious consequences for Bigger. After Mrs. Dalton leaves under the pretense that Mary is asleep, Bigger discovers that he has accidentally smothered Mary to death. Bigger believes, perhaps rightfully so, that there is no way to explain the situation that will reveal his innocence. This leads Bigger to "own" his "murder" of Mary, as he repeats the act, by decapitating her, chopping her into pieces with a hatchet, and hiding her body in the furnace of the Dalton household. He then begins to flee, hiding in various places, even persuading his girlfriend, Bessie to assist him, who he eventually murders to prevent her from revealing his crime. Bigger is eventually pursued, violently arrested, and imprisoned. Jan, sympathetic to Bigger's position as a black man, finds Boris Max, a lawyer associated with the communists to assist Bigger. Max gives an impassioned defense using social analysis of Bigger's material conditions to reveal that he was limited by the configurations, both discursively and institutionally, of civil society. At the same time, Max speaks with Bigger, offering Bigger a space to construct his own story of his life, and his act of murder. The defense fails, and Bigger is sentenced to death. Upon their final meeting, Max and Bigger have a moment of irreconcilability concerning the meaning of Bigger's life, and the implication of the trial.

This culminating scene, I argue, establishes between Bigger and Max a dichotomy between a sort of theoretical marxist progressivism symbolized by Max and the lived experience
of both white supremacy in both political and libidinal economies by Bigger. The tension that occurs when Bigger reveals his own understanding of his actions, his own "human" attempt to account for his experience, raises the fundamental question of African American participation in the world constructed by white agency. This tension, while most directly felt in the final exchange between Max and Bigger, is implicit in the various events of the novel.

Max's speech in the courtroom is a crucial moment for examining his own politics and his regard for Bigger. The speech makes many references to marxist ideas, most notably the idea of labor as central to a human's "species being." In the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," Karl Marx illustrates the concept of alienated labor. While Marx argues that humans (specifically workers) are alienated in many ways through the act of wage labor, one of the more intriguing modes of alienation divorces humans from their "species being." Humans are distinct from animals in that their life activity is an object for themselves. Whereas bees, birds, and beavers build their homes from material in the natural world like humans do, the distinguishing characteristic of humanity is that the construction of these homes does not end with the satisfaction of physical need. After a home is built, a human then is free to think about the home, and imagine further alterations of it. The human is free to direct his or her labor not only towards biological necessities, but also towards his or her own ambitions (84).

This discourse of freedom, where the self is posed as an entity with a relation to itself, suggests a form of consciousness that differs from typical marxist notions of consciousness. Rather than being politically conscious of the harms of capitalism and the ways that it dictates social life, this consciousness is directed towards the being of the individual as constituted in what the individual does, how it interacts with the world and others. This consciousness does not contain a rigorous scientific orientation that looks to material causes and power relations, but
rather houses an aesthetic orientation that defies stable symbolic representation. In other words, this "existential" consciousness is not something to know, but a way to be.

The typical marxist critique of capitalism calls attention to the way that capitalist modes of production rob the worker of agency within production. In *Native Son*, Max is concerned with the way that a specific portion of the working class, African Americans have been denied access to autonomy through the realization of labor. This contention is clearly exemplified in several moments in Max's ending speech in the courtroom, such as his reference to the way that education "stimulated and developed in him [Bigger] those impulses which all of us have, and then he was made to realize that he could not act upon them" (394). Max explains that the conditions that Bigger, and countless other African Americans have been forced to live under, the black belt apartments owned by Mr. Dalton and partitioned exclusively to be the black portion of the city, along with the exposure to white wealth and opportunity through school, "advertisements, radios, newspapers and movies," created a sense of inferiority and desperation within Bigger, not for physical survival, but of survival for his capacity to own himself, his labor activity (394). Max extends this claim into an examination of why Bigger killed. Max states: "after he murdered, he accepted the crime. And that's the important thing. It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him" (396). Here, Bigger's murder becomes his life activity. Accepting it "made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight" (396).

The final pages of the novel, however, complicate the relationship between Bigger and Max. The courtroom speech grants a level of agency to Bigger through the owning of his murder. But when Bigger frames the murder from his own perspective, in his own terms, Max becomes
unsettled. "I didn't want to kill!' Bigger shouted. 'But what I killed for, I am! It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder..." (429). Max responds: "No; no; no...Bigger, not that...", revealing his discomfort with Bigger's declaration that the murder speaks to some central part of his being (429). As Bigger continues to explain the feelings that drove him to kill, that justify his act of murder, Max becomes more distraught, as his eyes fill with terror, and his body wavers nervously between moving toward Bigger and remaining still (429). This truncated scene, depicted in less than two full pages, breaks down the relationship between Bigger and Max, and contains a tension that is articulated so succinctly that without an understanding of the political registers represented by Max and Bigger respectively, the reader is left with an ambiguous ending of the narrative. The reader is not given a clear way of evaluating Max's character, as he represents not only the sole figure who attempts to empathize with Bigger, but also the failure of that attempt.

As Seigel notes, the juxtaposition of the massive presence of Max with the short exchange and revelation of Bigger's newly found consciousness forces us to think through the contrast between Bigger and Max as symbolic of competing strategies, locations, and resolutions within black politics. The fact that a wide sweeping analysis of social conditions, the connections between Mr. Dalton's exploitation of black living conditions, the ideological message of black inferiority, etc. comes from Max's point of view highlights Bigger’s inability to perform that type of analysis. It is a strategy located outside of blackness. Gibson notes that Max's defense does not face the lived experience of Bigger Thomas as an individual, but is pointed towards the fact of Bigger's situation as systemic function of society (81-82). This is evident in Max's appeals towards preventing further unrest, avoiding the collapse of society at its foundations, and other invocations of the consequences for the stability and existence of society. This external voice
concerned with consequences external to Bigger's life is perhaps indicative of the West's invocation of black people as a problem people. Despite the good intentions and efforts of Max, it would seem that the blackness of Bigger matters more than the human suffering, the shared desire to avoid pain that could potentially frame Bigger and Max as equals.

A reading of this scene through the lens of afro-pessimism would suggest that Max's position as a sympathetic and liberal white does not absolve him of Anti-blackness. Wilderson argues that white subjects benefit from the fungibility of blackness even, and perhaps especially, when white subjects attempt to empathize with black subjects (*Red, White & Black* 19). Such attempts require imagining the suffering inherent to the experience of black subjects, which entails two important consequences. First, imagining the black experience enables a white project, marxist, feminist, postcolonial, or otherwise, that utilizes blackness as an arena for executing its own agenda. When marxists explain racism by framing it as a consequence of capitalism, the situation of blackness becomes an opportunity for challenging capitalism as opposed to an elucidation of white supremacy, which in turn, masks the way that marxism participates in white supremacy in the very act. Max's attempt to solve "the problem of blackness" is an appropriation of blackness as an entity with a type of utility, not an ethical gesture towards a group of human beings categorized as black. Second, the position of blackness offers a grammar for white projects. In other words, the slave (or the ontological condition of blackness) becomes a metaphor for white projects, as the aim for the marxist or white feminist is always explained using the grammar of freedom (just as the slave wants freedom in an ontological sense, the feminist desires freedom in a contingent sense of freedom from gendered violence, and the marxist desires freedom from capitalist exploitation) (21-22). Both of these consequences serve to enforce the illegibility and exclusion of blackness from civil society. As
blackness works to render white endeavors as both active and legible, it in turns becomes both passive and illegible. The plight of black suffering can only be understood insofar as it can be likened to a contingent instance of white suffering, and such comparisons only occur when articulating them serves the interest of a white subject.

A reading of *Native Son* through the lens of afro-pessimism must confront Max’s courtroom speech. If it is true that white efforts at confronting racism are troubled by the fungibility of blackness, Max's speech should contain instances of appropriation, moments where he benefits from Bigger's position as black. Max's reference to the profitability of racism validate such a reading. Within the speech, Max identifies wealthy property owners as individuals who perpetuate the cycle of violence that has manifested around Bigger. In a typical marxist fashion, Max depicts the interconnectedness between political officials, such as the state attorney, governor and mayor, and sources of capital such as bankers and merchants (386). He clearly positions oppressive structures as tools for exploitation, implying that the subjugation of Bigger Thomas is meant to serve the interests of the upper class property owners. The description of the relationship between the Dalton family and the Thomas family is described in terms of economic servitude, "that of renter to landlord, customer to merchant, employee to employer" (393). This would explain the situation of Bigger as one where an economic rationale would elaborate the motives for perpetuating the system of domination. This denies the irrational nature of gratuitous violence inherent within civil society. The consequences of denying gratuitous violence manifest in other dimensions of Max's speech. For example, Max often positions the oppression of African Americans alongside the oppression of workers and labor unions. He frames the collective group of threats to the order established by wealth elites as victims of ongoing historical exclusion and violence (385-386). Specifically, Max frames the oppression of African
Americans as an inversion of the experience of the settlers who founded the country, as African Americans are "conditioned by our own notions as we were by European ones when we first came here," and are similarly "struggling within unbelievably narrow limits to achieve that feeling of at-home-ness" (398). This insight implies a dialectical resolution to social conflict, where the creation of America occurred as the resolution of a conflict, and that resolution eventually became a part of another conflict, that of racism within American society.

From this perspective, Max is a sympathetic progressive discourse that appropriates Bigger's situation for his own needs. Throughout section three, the exchanges between Max and Buckley, the state attorney, center around Bigger while enacting a larger conflict. Buckley is not satisfied with finding Bigger guilty of the murder of both Mary and Bessie. While he also tries to link Bigger to other murders of white women, he is insistent upon finding some way to attach his crimes to the communists, specifically Jan. This conflict between Max and Buckley is a conflict within society among the fully human. In this sense, Bigger is the terrain for their own conflict.

Although Max never admits to having an interest in defending Bigger, the ending scene would suggest that he is invested in a certain world view where Bigger stands as a problem, a thing of the white world for white cognition and activity, just as labor (in a world free of capitalist exploitation) is a thing for the cognition and activity of the laborer. When Bigger accepts that he murders because of some deeply ingrained feeling, it disturbs Max. Max consistently explains that Bigger's actions are a result of deep deprivation, and that his life is an extremely corrupted life because of the harms of structural oppression. Bigger's embrace of that corrupted life is a problem of Max. Apparently, Bigger is only respectable when he accepts certain values espoused by Max. Bigger's attempt to affirm himself is a loss of "property," the means of action and affirmation for Max; Bigger is no longer a prop for Max's imagining and
creation of his own existence. When Max say "y-you've got to b-believe in yourself, Bigger," the
self that he is referring to is already determined (428). It is a self outlined by the agency of
whiteness, that take blackness not only as its property in a physical and economic sense, but in a
more discursive, perhaps ontological sense. Morrison discusses this sense in her book, Playing in
the Dark, a freedom to "narrate the world" (64). Morrison explains that the juxtaposition between
an "embodied humanity" that is full of freedom and agency, and a "discredited Africanism" not
only reifies constructions that are in the service of white supremacy, but in exercising the ability
to narrate these oppositions and mobilize them as modes of explaining the world, white subjects
display a form of agency that is dependent upon the use of Africanism to render not only the
content of their narration, but the authority to narrate (80). While Morrison is specifically
referring to the white authors who have employed such discourses in their novels, Max's act of
narrating Bigger's situation can be analyzed using the same method because of the structures of
anti-blackness that are always already at work within civil society. The way in which Max posits
forth an understanding of Bigger's life, that in many ways relies upon elements of a marxist
narrative of class struggle and social domination, along with his complacency is Bigger's silence
in the trial and his discomfort at Bigger's own attempts to narrate the world (which rob Max of
his ability to narrate, transforming Bigger from a thing to be explained into a dangerous thing
explaining itself) all suggest that Max is profiting from a certain capacity to use Bigger as
"fungible flesh" to mount on "an emancipatory journey" (Red, White & Black 89).

However, it is important to investigate the possibility of an alternative reading of the text
drawing upon the work of West. West argues that Native Son is an attempt to depict the
psychological dramas that occur when a denigrated black subject interacts with a white world
"with no room for black space, place, or face" that "feeds on a black futurelessness and black
hopelessness" (*Black Strivings* 101). West explains that Bigger oscillates between two responses to the degraded condition of black humanity (or lack thereof), hatred of self and hatred of others (95). West explains that both responses encourage destructive reactions, destruction of the self or destruction of others. Both sides of this coin are a response to the inability to invent oneself as a black subject. Bigger's situation, his life, presents itself as riddle, an enigma as to why he is inferior. From West's perspective, the plot of the novel presents different responses to that question, or in other words, different relations to blackness from the within a black experience.

To return to the culminating scene, Bigger's expression of a deep motivation to kill, and claiming that what he killed for is what he is, is arguably an attempt to accept what Fanon would call "the lived experience of the black man." Joyce Ann Joyce in her book, *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy*, explains that Max offers a theoretical explanation of Bigger's life in the trial scene, and that he performs with an intent to illuminate the violent workings of society and awaken the sleep walkers that enact the drama of this violence (110). Furthermore, Max invokes a utilitarian sense of safety as the reason to spare Bigger's life. Max explains that the current arrangement of society will "swell the tide of pent-up lava that will some day break loose," referring to the possibility that Bigger's murders foreshadow a greater degree of violence from the masses of African Americans facing the same deprivation on both material and psychological levels (392). Max closes his speech by appealing to the court to spare Bigger's life not only so that "this black boy [may] live, but that we ourselves may not die!" (405). Max describes the plight of Bigger Thomas as a problem, not merely for the individuals who live in that plight, but for the white society who will suffer the consequences of the tide of pent-up lava; In doing so, he remains accountable to the white subjects of the courtroom, the human subjects of society. There is no
sense of accountability to witness and respect Bigger's own understanding of his life and his actions.

Bigger's final words to Max, however, do not function in the same way. Bigger comes to terms with the feelings he experiences throughout the novel. To say he is defined by, that he is the feeling that led him to murder Mary and Bessie is to point to a part of himself to which he has always reacted but never faced. In "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison explains that Wright is invested in a blues mentality.

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. (78)

Ellison further explains that the blues "provide no solution" and "offer no scapegoat but the self" (94). Bigger's claim to accept this part of himself, this inner impulse that would kill out of both fear and hatred, is in line with a blues mentality. There is no ending consolation for Bigger. He faces the fact that he is going to die, and that he will die for actions that are constitutive part of his identity. Bigger is able to face his internal state of fear and hatred, keeping its painful details alive in his "aching consciousness" and fingering "jagged grain." There is nothing about such a gesture that can enact Marx's demand in "Theses on Feurbach" that theory and philosophy must change the world, and not merely interpret it. Ellison notes in 1945, the original publication of the essay, that "Nowhere in America today is there social or political action based upon the solid realities of Negro life" (94). Bigger is fortunate enough that he has been forced into a corner alongside communists and that they have a stake in his life. But it is important to highlight that even if Max's speech were to succeed in persuading the court, Bigger's life would still be an
object, a means to an end. He would be saved not because anybody understood his life (Max's final reactions to Bigger reveal the shortcomings of society at large) but because there was something at stake for white society in his life whether it was the possibility of quelling further violence or validating a narrative that could explain Bigger's life while maintaining exclusive agency in the production of such narratives.

Bigger emerges in this culminating scene galvanized with a blues mentality that cannot vanquish fear or hatred, but can ease the paralyzing impulse of fear and hatred. The novel's opening scene depicts the Thomas family's violent interaction with a black rat, as his family cowers away from it and Bigger brutally exterminates it. Later in the first section, Bigger is approached by the Dalton's white cat, which hovers around him invoking feelings of surveillance and subjection, rendering Bigger nearly catatonic in his exchanges with the Daltons. Both of these scenes reveal Bigger's relation to his own blackness. The brutal killing of the rat symbolizes his self-loathing of his own blackness and the violence he projects onto that which reminds of his blackness. The later scenes of violence with Gus are further examples of this projection. Bigger's fear of the cat, with its ability to surround him and move weightlessly about him, symbolizes a subservience to whiteness. Even as Jan, Mary and Mr. Dalton insist that he open up to them, his reaction to whiteness confines his freedom, as Bigger is always monitored by a force that moves effortlessly around the weight of his black body. Bigger's blues mentality toward the end of the novel does not free him of his relations to himself and to whiteness as symbolized through his interactions with animals, but they would allow him to recognize himself in the rat, to see the rat as symbol for himself, and to see the cat as a symbol for the white subjects he encounters. This insight involves facing the tragic dimensions of black life, while the ability to name the pain involved in such a tragedy, the act of fingering the jagged edge, is a
reminder that tragic life is still life, and that there is always agency in a human's relation to his own life.

West draws heavily upon this blues mentality in the book *Democracy Matters*. He is specifically concerned with the way that a blues mentality, an aesthetic element of music that has social implications, should be formulated into an orientation towards politics. He explains the way that the blues mentality has been motivated not only the survival of black people in America but protest as well, as it has given them the ability "to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism" (21).

I speak from the experience of teaching West's *Democracy Matters* and exploring his ideas about a blues orientation towards life that it is indeed difficult to explain what exactly it means to face life with a blues mentality. Students who do not listen to the blues or are unfamiliar with it are very quick to point out the difficulty in discerning such a blues mentality from a passive acceptance of life's woe with consolation of happiness through art for art's sake. I think that this speaks to the relevance of projects like this that form connections between "intellectual" and "cultural" or artistic creations (as though the separation between the two is ever a clear one). While West can point to a recuperative effect within black music, he cannot create it. In several interviews and public appearances, West has mentioned Blind Willie Johnson as a cultural genius in his blues creations. Upon my first time listening to Johnson's "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground," I must admit that I began to see some validity in my students' reactions. But after a second, and perhaps third time listening to the song, I began to see the beauty in its dissonant chords and Johnson's chilling wails. I learned to listen to the blues as an expression of pain that refuses to succumb to suffering, and asserts that material, irreducible existence of a living body within that pain. Whether or not my own attempt here to explicate a
blues sensibility does it any justice, or contributes to the conversation between West and Wright, the attempt at tracing these influences, with attention the literary, musical, or artistic attempts to express them permits a form of reflection that draws upon multiple sources in an attempt to come to grips with what is suggested by colloquial phrases such as "gotta go there to know there," or "gotta feel to know."

In this regard, Bigger's mentality at the end of novel appears as a part of a larger cultural legacy, along with Mamie Till Mobley, mother of Emmet Till, who refused hatred in the pursuit of justice (Democracy Matters 20-21). These actions can be connected with West's larger point, that the cultural strivings of Black America are transfigurations of the original guttural cry from the slave ships. The cultivation of a blues mentality can be seen as a form of self authorization within a discursive economy that denies that self any form of affirmation. The slave's cry, Johnson's wailing lyrics, Mobley's perseverance, and Bigger's attempt to own his criminal acts, are all fugitive actions, as they are discursive refusal of objectification within anti-blackness. Native Son in this light is not only a tragic and violent story about the experience of white society from a black subjectivity, but it is also a description of Bigger's own transformation into a subject capable of claiming his own experience.

There are certain issues in the text that need reconciliation in order to posit Native Son as a novel that depicts Bigger's own transfiguration of the guttural cry. Most importantly, the role of Max seems somewhat ambiguous. Bigger clearly attributes his final realizations to Max, who asks him questions and gives him the space to define himself. If Max is ultimately horrified by Bigger's own recollections of his experiences, then his role in the Bigger's realization is problematic, as Bigger's coming to consciousness of his position as black relies upon a discourse that profits from his denigrated experience.
West's philosophy is sympathetic towards marxist discourse and theory, but is always insistent upon their limitations. In an essay entitled "The Making of an American Radical Democrat of African Descent," West highlights the indispensability of marxist analysis in terms of looking at social relation and power, while noting that it contains very little in the way of dealing existential despair and tragedy (12-13). Max offers Bigger two things, one consciously, and the other unconsciously. In his speech, Max highlights the way that power has functioned to place Bigger in a particular position, and the way that society benefits from keeping Bigger in that position. It is difficult to refute the accuracy of many of Max's claims, such as his explanation that the structural and institutional racism from which Mr. Dalton benefits is not "justified" or "corrected" through his donations to black colleges or community centers. This illumination into the mechanisms of oppression validates Bigger's feelings by showing that his experience has been implicated by the workings of society at large.

However, West's major criticism of marxism is that it does not grapple with the existential factor of oppression. While it is useful to see how oppression functions on the level of institutions, it doesn't offer the individual a way to relate to oppression, a mode of subjectivity for approaching an absurd denial of dignity to certain populations. Max unknowingly falls into the perspective that through his understandings of marxism and his actions towards Bigger he is approaching oppression correctly. Marxism is transparent to him as an ethical orientation toward the world. West would likely contend that such obedience to marxism absolves Max of the necessity of the existential questioning would provoke an inquiry into the similarities between Max, Mr. Dalton, and Buckley. All three of these figures, for different rationales, face Bigger as a prop for their own dramas. The goals of the drama or the values that motivate the drama cannot absolve the existential relationship between these figures as actors and Bigger as thing. Edwin
Berry Bergum argues that *Native Son* foregrounds moments of illegibility that make civil interactions between racial groups impossible. Bergum notes that community across groups such as these is dependent upon some form of commonality along lines of class or other affiliations. Mary, Jan, and Mr. Dalton all face Bigger as sympathizers with his condition as black. In framing their relationships with Bigger as "black man and ally," they have already foreclosed Bigger's ability to frame a form of commonality, and in fact, have reified Bigger's notions of whiteness ("The Promise of Democracy and the Fiction of Richard Wright" 67-68). White people have always had the deciding factor of every part of Bigger's life and were determined "they won't let (him) do nothing," (*Native Son* 19). By confronting Bigger with the assumption that he should trust them, they have fulfilled that function of whiteness as always already the deciding factor in Bigger's life, regardless of good intention. Furthermore, the drama and its self-justifications mask this existential relationship. Mr. Dalton sees himself as a benign benefactor to African Americans, whereas Buckley's justification would like accept the racialized discourses that validate notions of black inferiority. Even though Max's justification for his own actions criticize the shallow nature of both Buckley and Mr. Dalton's justifications, it cannot reveal the contingent and arbitrary nature of its own justifications.

By offering Bigger an opening to narrate his experience, the ability to express himself absent any stable external guarantee of authority, Max pushes Bigger to give an account of himself with nothing but his own experiences. The lack of the guarantee of meaning requires Bigger to account for his actions in a way that explains his feelings but does not absolve himself of his own agency. He must simultaneously affirm his own fallibility and the concreteness of his emotional perception. This allows him to draw upon the blues mentality by the end of the novel, and in doing so he is able to utilize Max's marxist analysis, while avoiding its bad faith.
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

While *Native Son* depicts the condition of blackness as violently abject, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* illustrates the absurd obstacles to black strivings and the indeterminacy of such obstacles. While Bigger is constantly reminded of the hopelessness of his situation, the narrator of *Invisible Man* is surrounded by "experts" of his condition from both sides of the color line. One might describe this difference as one between physical/material functions of race and intellectual/ideological functions of race. Bigger experiences estrangement through the material conditions of living in substandard housing and working by and for the whims of white people. These constraints are not as insurmountable for *Invisible Man*’s narrator, as he is able to attend school and work as a member of the Brotherhood. Rather, the narrator is forced to obey what Marx would identify as "superstructural" limitations. He must repeatedly conform to the rules of race that are formed by others, in which blackness is already overdetermined, even by sympathetic discourses, or even those within blackness. While *Native Son* focuses mainly on the Bigger's experience and relationship to his own blackness, *Invisible Man*’s protagonist encounters multiple variations of blackness, from his time at the university to his encounters with Ras the Destroyer. Similarly, while there is a sense that Max is less complicit in anti-blackness than Mr. Dalton or Buckley, *Native Son* is less concerned with exploring the "shades" of whiteness-various approaches or manifestations of whiteness-than it is concerned with demonstrating the pervasiveness of whiteness. *Invisible Man* contains many different forms of whiteness, and even goes as far as to suggest that even poor whites, and other non-white races participate in anti-blackness. Ellison seems to be more concerned with the instabilities of the orders of anti-blackness, whereas Wright is very much concerned with elucidating their impact upon society.
While this would suggest a certain opposition between *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*, the commonalities between novels are significant. Stylistic and thematic issues (particularly the idea of visibility, suggested by the title and metaphor with Ellison and the reference to light, darkness, and blindness with Wright) are shared between the texts, and there is no denying that Ellison is borrowing and improvising materially within Wright's works. For this project, two particular issues are important, both of which relating to politics within American society. First, both novels are concerned with the appropriation of blackness by the Communist Party. Second, both novels address tensions between social freedom and personal freedom. While Bigger negotiates his own personal freedom because of his inability to access or participate in movements for social freedom, *Invisible Man*'s protagonist goes through a process of trying to realize a personal freedom within a struggle towards a global social freedom as espoused by the Brotherhood. These variances in scope can be attributed to Ellison's experimental style as influenced by James Joyce and T.S. Eliot. *Invisible Man* displays various techniques including absurd depictions of reality and allegorical symbolism. While neither author's work can be reduced to a single message, theme, and political ideology, Wright is focused on specific issues of black life in America, while Ellison is determined to reveal the way that race is always already present in multiple places within American society.

The interesting element of this dynamic is the fluidity of power and its effect on the narrator. For example, there are moments when the narrator confronts figures of authority with political or social influence that affect the narrator in tangible ways. Clear examples of this occur early in the novel with both Dr. Bledsoe and Mr. Norton, characters that the narrator seeks to please. There is a clear rational incentive for this, as the Bledsoe and Norton can affect the narrator's position at the college. However, a greater influence is placed on the necessity to meet
the standards that both Bledsoe and Norton have for the narrator. Both the opening scene of chapter two, with Mr. Norton's explanation of the narrator's role in his own destiny, and the events of chapter four, where Bledsoe explains the need to control white people by playing on their naïveté, are moments where the narrator is given not only a world view that accounts for issues of race, but is also given a role to play in that world.

Aside from these two characters, the narrator is also given racial worldviews and roles from characters with significantly less power. Mary, the woman who gives the narrator a place to stay towards the middle of the book, is constantly pressuring the narrator to become some form of a race leader, and that he develop skills that can become "a credit to the race." Mary's gestures of kindness towards the narrator indicate a level of respect in this regard. Instead of trying to guide him along the right path, she openly admits that he is capable of things beyond her, and will certainly do things that will benefit her and others in her position. These lateral gestures between equals (or possibly, gestures from inferior to superior) still impact the narrator with a sense of duty, a necessity to become someone in a position to lead the race. Foucault's notions of juridical and disciplinary power are useful in clarifying this distinction, and further defining the differences in the racial traumas depicted in *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*, respectively. Juridical power refers to the ability to enact violence on illicit actions or presences within a given order. Disciplinary power is the ability for dominant identities and structures to replicate themselves within subjects such that the threat of violence is not necessary; disciplinary power creates a form of self-policing within subjects. Bigger reacts to the constant threat that any white person can enact any form of violence upon him with immunity, and, in the presence of whiteness, is paralyzed into certain subjectivities through the fear that a white subject might disapprove of his mode of performing a black body and inflict tangible harm upon him, an example of juridical
power. The narrator of *Invisible Man* differs from this in that he is concerned with performing a benign black subjectivity because he endorses theological and moral notions of good versus evil and the racial coding implicit within them. For the narrator, Failing to be what might be called a "good negro" does not bare a utilitarian harm but more of a symbolic failure as a human being as well as dishonor. The protagonist has internalized white values and judgments and constantly monitors himself with the intent of self-regulation, revealing the function of disciplinary power. In terms of afro-pessimism, *Invisible Man's* narrator might be trying to grapple with the consequences of social death, as he must redeem himself from the condition of being a dark body inscribed with notions of sin, evil and denigration.

The novel can thus be seen as an attempt to navigate a tumultuous American racial terrain, where blackness is formed as paradox. Many scholars, such as Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters* have remarked upon the tension that the invisible quality of blackness relies upon its hypervisibility (17). When characters interact with the narrator, they are not able to penetrate the blackness of his skin to interact with his self-fashioning of his lived experience. Black skin, though itself extremely opaque, renders the narrators psyche transparent to various characters, in that they assume they are able to know his position and experience when in fact, they are often shaping and subjecting the narrator through those encounters. It is necessary, however, to extend this analysis past the level of visibility versus invisibility and towards the direction of fixed versus mutable. In the fifteenth chapter, the narrator tries to dispose of a briefcase containing the coins and broken pieces of a change holder shaped in the image of racist caricature. In attempting to do so, he stopped twice, once by "a short yellow woman" (possibly indicating an Asian identity) and once by a "squat man in worn clothes" (possibly indicating a working class identity) (328, 329). The yellow woman confronts the narrator, demanding that he remove the
briefcase from her garbage, chastising him with the claim that "southern Negroes mess up things for the rest of us" (328). This is followed by the accusation from the squat man that the narrator is a part of a drug deal, along with the declaration, "You young New York Negroes is a blip! (330). Both of these characters confront the narrator's blackness with their own notions of how it explains his actions, and both, to varying degrees, are wrong. The narrator is a fixed thing before the eyes of these onlookers, and there is no opening for the narrator himself to inform their views of what or who he is. The concrete appearance of black skin coincides with a concrete conclusion as to its implications. However, the fixed condition of blackness is only its quality as overdetermined, as the squat man and yellow woman arrive at two different conclusions about the narrator's whereabouts. Blackness is otherwise mutable, as different characters hold different expectations for the narrator, and the narrator himself is unable to revise or alter the views of others. Blackness as such, becomes an untenable position. It is always the psychic property of another, who is never held accountable to any concrete accountability in there constructions of blackness.

This drama concerning the status of blackness is what animates the tension between West's optimism and Wilderson's pessimism. The narrator briefly interacts with several black characters throughout the text who offer him differing versions of a particular insight, that he use his invisibility and the fixed expectations and assumptions of white people to his advantage. Bledsoe remarks that he at times "had to act the nigger," implying that it was necessary for him to conform to white assumptions of blackness (143). He insists that while he is "big and black" and says "'Yes, suh' as loudly as any burrhead when it's convenient," he is "still the king down here" (142). Later, as the narrator rides the bus to the north, the veteran aboard the bus tells him to "learn to look beneath the surface," and "play the game, but don't believe in it...Even if it lands
you in a straight jacket” (153). The veteran is similarly urging the narrator to play within the constructions of race created by white society, as white people have "forgotten to take care of the books" providing an opportunity for black people to "remain hidden right out in the open" (154).

Both characters, for different ends and with different intentions, invoke Houston Baker's concept of "mastery of form" as described within *Modernism and The Harlem Renaissance*. Baker describes the mastery of form as a conscious embodiment of the minstrel mask, particularly its "deep-seated denial of the indisputable humanity of inhabitants of and descendants from the continent of Africa" (17). Baker locates a prime example of the mastery of form in the speeches of Booker T. Washington, as he often invokes racial stereotypes such as a "chicken-stealing darky" (27). Ultimately, however, Washington's performance of stereotypical ideas of blackness makes him legible to white audiences, and in fact makes what would ordinarily appear as the threat of a black nation appear as an urban sector in need of redemption (29). This disguise allowed Washington to gain the support of white society through charity towards schools and black enterprise. The quality of invisibility is a crucial element in this, as it provides that initial surface of assumptions, which appear fixed, but really "are rhetorical possibilities for crafting a voice out of tight places" (33). This artistic fashioning of subjectivity within the constraints of white society not only serves utilitarian purposes, but allows for the transformation of "awkwardly demeaning minstrel steps into pure kinesthetics and masterful black artistry," simultaneously playing the game of the mask while keeping its status as a game alive within one's consciousness (33).

The presence of mastery of form as a cultural mode of being, and not merely a literary or rhetorical technique suggests several things with respect to West's insights into the African American condition. Performing the form of the minstrel mask draws upon the legacy of
"improvisational intellectuality" that West contends is an African legacy present within America. Additionally, Baker suggests that the power of the mastery of form relies upon form not as a fixed container of content but a fluid motion that moves between signifier and signified and is constantly mutable. This motion, along with the sonic quality of performing a minstrel identity, of speaking in a black vernacular, suggests a connection to West's "kinetic orality," another legacy of African culture. Thus, the mastery of form validates West's skepticism towards the natal alienation hypothesis that is critical component to the thesis of social death. Furthermore, the ability to work within these constraints and enact forms of survival suggests that African American agency does exist, and that it can provide a form of culture for those who have suffered the middle passage.

Wilderson would likely call attention to the way that mutability not only renders white people vulnerable to black improvisation but also provides no common stasis for black community. It matters that it is a "theoretical" observation that the minstrel mask is elastic, and that certain black figures adopt the role of playing with its elasticity while others accept the state of blackness objectively, or are critical of those who seek improvisation. Reverend Barbee, for example, seems to suggest a very real character of blackness as a plight to redeem oneself from darkness. His blindness would seem to suggest that he, like white people, is unable to see "beneath the surface." Similarly, the veteran's attendant, Crenshaw, is very critical of the reactionary nature of the veteran's advice. Even Mary seems less concerned with trying to improvise within the constraints of blackness, and is instead relying on young black men and women to bring about change in the impoverished situation of black America. There is very little in common among these various perspectives, and it is difficult to suggest a sense of community among them.
Wilderson insists that black cultural production, unlike "human" cultural production, does not contain cultural politics but instead a political culture (*Red, White & Black* 57). Wilderson himself is less than clear about this distinction, but the relations within *Invisible Man* present contextual elaboration. Instead of clear and definitive points of contestation within culture, such as those suggested by common juxtapositions between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., *Invisible Man* depicts a black culture politicized to point where interaction between differing positions is foreclosed. The need to assert not only blackness but a clear and definitive cultural and political strategy within blackness obscures the fact that blackness is always under contestation, even among black subjects. Wilderson suggests something close to this when he states that "the Black is openly vulnerable to the whims of the world, and so is her or her cultural 'production'" (*Red, White & Black* 56). Another way of phrasing this using the framework of afro-pessimism is that while black bodies are fungible for the appropriation on behalf of human subjects, blackness itself as a condition, identity, and culture is fungible for black subjects.

It is also necessary to examine to frame around which the narrative is told, the location of the narrator underground, having experienced the events of the narrative. This position of being underground is framed somewhat positively, as he is able to use electricity liberally and is not forced to pay for it. This seems to imply a certain utilitarian function of invisibility, as it allows him to enact sabotage. The narrator describes his dwelling, the basement of an apartment building that everyone believes to be abandoned because of his invisibility, as a warm hole full of light, which allows him not only to see his own darkness, but becomes a vantage point from which the narrator can analyze the rest of society. He mentions that the places that one would assume to be the most full of light, such as the Empire State Building and Broadway, are in fact
the most dark. Ellison employs the metaphor of vision to touch upon notions of epistemology, specifically the ways in which white people do not recognize the lives of black people, and are unable to see the inner workings of race as a central component of society. This is contrasted with the extreme light of the apartment, the location from which the prologue and epilogue are given. The prologue includes references to various images, including West Indian head-buttng techniques, American traditions of "tinker-thinkers," the music of Louis Armstrong, and even a sense of the differences in the experiences of time between white and black people. The "black" sense of time, which the narrator discovers through listening to Armstrong and watching a yokel fight a prizefighter in a boxing match, is also described as descending into a "slower tempo and cave" (9).

This description of subterranean caves and holes touches upon another of Baker's tropes, the black (w)hole. Baker draws upon the physics of black holes (the cosmic occurrence), specifically noting that they are invisible because of the way that they interact with light, but are detectable by the massive amount of energy and mass that is drawn towards the center of the black hole (Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature 144-145). He locates these traits within the trope of black (w)holes, as they are similarly invisible, but are also draw in a great deal of information and culture. Baker specifically references the ways in which Richard Wright describes his yearning for literature and culture as a youth, but a similar instance occurs with the narrator of Invisible Man. The narrator's reference to light and dark, visibility and invisibility depict the inverse relationship between being visible as a subject and the subject's capacity for sight. Because of his invisibility, the narrator is able to draw upon the light of the electric company, and use it for his own ends, to see his own darkness as well as illuminate the rest of the world.
What critics like Baker, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and countless others are finding within *Invisible Man*, speaking as well to the continuing relevance of *Invisible Man* in sociology, is the power of blackness to enable ways of seeing, of providing accounts for the world and the relations that drive its events. In a sense, one can say that there is a form of theorization that is displayed by the position underground. Charles Mills, in the essay "White Ignorance," notes that African Americans have been forced to become "lay anthropologists" as a means of survival in a world that runs not only according to the interests of capital but also to the interests and desires (much less predictable) of whites (17). *Invisible Man*, Mills argues, is an epistemological novel as it navigates the various dynamics that inform various worldviews (18). The optimistic reading, drawing from Baker, would suggest that drawing from the various perspectives and moving in and out of them would form a whole, a subjectivity capable of exercising agency even when agency is denied.

It is important, however, to look to the novel's epilogue, as the narrator seems ambivalent in many respects. It is clear that the underground position is one of a cerebral nature, as the narrator explains "In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind" (580). He continues to explain that the strategy of the underground retreat is the creation of a plan to counter the chaos of the happenings above the ground, part of which requires giving "pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties" (580-581). Here, it is clear that there is a Manichean juxtaposition between the values and life world of white society and the black existences that function underground, in that one is forced to grapple with the inconsistencies and vicissitudes of the other. Furthermore, despite the ability to function within the hole, to name the world according to his own experiences, the narrator explains that he was loved and appreciated only when he "tried to 'justify' and affirm someone's mistaken beliefs" (573). He explains that this
often came with a great price, "in order to justify them, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself until my eyes bulged and my tongue hung out and wagged like the door of an empty house in a high wind. Oh, yes, it made them happy and it made me sick" (573). This is a rethinking of the strategy of mastery of form, exemplified early on in the novel with the narrator's grandfather's advice to "yes" white people to death. Clearly, "yes-ing" affirming the worldview of others, providing them with a sense of security is an exhausting feat. Additionally, this ambivalence is a reaction to an ambiguity. Since being invisible destroys the clarity of "such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty" by constituting them as "such shifting shapes that [one] confuses one with the other," the position underground, much like the position of the philosopher and theorists, runs the risk of thinking itself into paradoxes and contradictions and becoming trapped in paralysis (573).

The culmination of the novel suggests that the fungible nature of blackness within society limits the productive capacity provided by the ability for blackness to assume wholeness at the margins. The narrator wraps up the epilogue while insisting that he needs to leave the underground and emerge unto the world. Simultaneously, however, he discusses the problems inherent in doing so. After all, Armstrong would never leave or compromise the underground, as it is the underground, with its stench of bad air, that provides the impetus for his music and the "dancing and diversity" that accompany it (581). This raises important questions about the ultimate utility of the transfigurations of the guttural cry. It may be the case that the blues mentality serves a recuperative private function, and that there is a certain joy within the jazz music derived from black experience, but it is certainly difficult to imagine how such artistic perspectives translate into engagements with white civil society. West would argue that such
perspectives are critical to reinvigorating American democracy, but the events of the novel would suggest that their necessity does not guarantee their efficacy.

The realization that the Brotherhood had actually planned the riots, and that they used the narrator as a part of that plan, leads the narrator to abandon the hope of political strategy. The Brotherhood managed to orchestrate the events of Clifton's demise, creating an opportunity for the narrator to deliver a stirring speech to Harlem. The narrator realizes that his speech instills a tension in the audience, hoping that it would lead to the promise of unity and toward the teleological goal of utopia as espoused by the Brotherhood. But instead, that tension becomes the inspiration for riots, as the final chapters depict a violent series of raids within Harlem. Ras the Destroyer plays a part in inciting the riots, but ultimately, the narrator concludes that the events leading up to the riot were carefully orchestrated to eliminate the threat of Ras's nationalistic dissent to the Brotherhood.

It is worth raising an important question about the narrator's position as black within these final moments. It is interesting that there is a separation between the black population of Harlem and the tension that leads them to riot, and the narrator himself, who experiences no such tension. Scholars have noted that the narrator is shaped and pacified by the doctor's at the factory hospital. In "Invisible Man" as 'a form of social power': The Evolution of Ralph Ellison's Politics," William Nash describes the electroshock treatment given by the doctors at the factory hospital as "an attempt to cauterize his psychic wounds" (108). The doctors not only maintain a sense of power and control over the narrator through the relationship of "doctor to patient," but also use various racialized forms of identification, calling him "boy" and referencing the movement of his writhing body as a form of rhythm, drawing from stereotypes of blackness. Nash argues that this scene represents the production of black subjectivity that can be accommodated into civil...
society. The narrator's loss of identity through this process losing himself in a "scale of receding grays" represents a forgetting (or erasure) of heritage. By erasing the sense of blackness instilled by black communities, presumably during his time at the university, the narrator becomes a fungible not just as a black presence, but as a subject who can be "programmed" with a white sense of the world (108). The scene is metaphorical image, as the discursive function of disciplinary power, of producing black subjects that obey white power structures is depicted through a physical act of surgery.

Nash notes, however, that the narrator exercises a form a agency by "thwarting" this erasure, by "calling the African American folk tradition to mind." Various songs and stories from his family, including the trope of "playing the dozens" all come to his mind during the interrogation. The narrator describes this as a retreat into "the blackness of my mind" (239). If the narrator is able to slip into blackness to hide himself, preserve himself even, from white surveillance and authority. The scene ultimately becomes a conflict between the anti-black surgeons' attempt at dominating the narrator through subjection, and the narrator's ability of artifice, performance, and cultural recuperation. In a sense, Ellison is elucidating a future conflict between Foucault's theories of subjectivity and power and Baker's theory of agency through tropical revision and performance.

After the surgery, the narrator seems to adopt a dual strategy. Thomas Whitaker notes that the narrator draws attention to the power of eloquence, a certain magic with words that comes from a connection between the speaker and audience (50-51). The narrator is only able to produce this magic when he is able to call forth a false self, implying that not only is there a creativity in the production of a message and rhetoric, but that a subjectivity, a form, is created through eloquent speeches. This is an extension of the strategy of "falling into blackness" during
the interrogation. By concealing the conscious self, a black self, behind an artificial imagining of self, the narrator is able to move through different social spheres and participate in social happenings in the world, including social movements like the Brotherhood. The narrator recognizes this ability as strength, and believes that it keeps him one step ahead at all times. In an interesting way, this position is a combination of the paradigms espoused by Mary and Bledsoe. Mary's endorsement of DuBois' talented tenth encourages black participation in movements towards social freedom, while Bledsoe asserts that true freedom for black people requires playing on the expectations of white people. The narrator seems to have found a way to both, generating both a sense of personal freedom (that is non-coercive, selfish, or materialistic, differing from Bledsoe) and a way to participate in the process of changing the world.

This agency unfortunately fails by the end of the novel. A group of rioters begin to chase the narrator, and in order to escape them, he descends into a manhole, hoping to hide long enough to escape. The language used to describe the underground location is particularly telling, as it is surrounded by coal and dirt and poorly lit. The narrator even goes as far to call his position "a kind of death without hanging...a death alive" (566). This act of hiding, of being concealed in blackness from the rioters, a manifestation of blackness itself driven by Ras the Destroyers logic, a logic which denies him access to words and eloquence, is oppressive, and suggests, in many ways, an acceptance of the charges of natal alienation and social death. While the loss of official cultural codes permits play and revision, the ability to use many different forms, the lack of a "home" ultimately leaves one open to the vicissitudes of the world. Ellison depicts the contestation between West's cultural rejuvenation and Wilderson's social death, and suggests that social death leaves one in a state of constant vulnerability that the political nature of black culture is unable to resolve.
Conclusion

This project has investigated the ways in which the optimism and pessimism espoused by the works of West and Wilderson respectively interact with one another in the novels, *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*. One of the goals of this endeavor has been to reveal the way in which philosophical and theoretical dialogues about white supremacy, the legacy of slavery, and racial politics around the 21st century are rooted in cultural production of the mid-20th century. Additionally, by giving a concrete context for elaboration, this work has clarified the theories of West and Wilderson, as well as furthered validated Wilderson's claim that the two thinkers agree upon certain facets of civil society and race relations.

I cannot stress enough that the parameters of this project have been set around the works of West and Wilderson and works that these authors most intimately relate to (such as that of Orlando Patterson). Indeed the term, "Black Optimism" is probably best reserved for the theoretical investigations pursued by Fred Moten in his *In the Break*. While some of his insights are certainly relevant to this project (such as the break between "the fact of blackness" and "the lived experience of the black man") it is important to note that Moten's thought and work is not adequately represented here. The contestation between pessimism and optimism strictly within the field of critical theory has been explored elsewhere by various thinkers, and is not explicitly addressed here. This project has been an attempt at bringing the philosophical and cultural criticism of West into conversation with the critical and paradigmatic analysis of Wilderson beyond Wilderson's initial reference to West's work. This interdisciplinary exercise has attempted to establish a bases for further interaction between thinkers in these respective disciplines.
It is difficult to evaluate the interactions between West and Wilderson as one would evaluate competing theories and ideologies of any sort, especially since the overlap between the thinkers seems to be greater than what initial juxtaposition would suggest. A problem that readers face in the works of both thinkers is that they are prone to uses of language that are less clear than they are evocative. Wilderson's claim for the necessity of destroying civil society is as ambiguous as it is alarming. In a theoretical sense, the destruction of civil society could merely mean destroying the rubric of white explorer and Africanist presence that Morrison locates in American literature. While doing this would indeed imply a radical change in American society (one that West would probably be amenable to) it is worth investigating such a change is possible without the apocalyptic imagery of fire and explosion that phrases like "end of the world" evoke. Further, when West calls for a necessity of a tragicomic orientation towards life, it is difficult to imagine how that would manifest at the level of politics.

The three literary authors within this text, Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison, are often referenced as a sort of influential trio, as the work of one author clearly impacts and is impacted by the work the others. Again, I cannot stress enough that this project explores only a small section of the overlapping political themes of the three writers, and that other texts provide opportunities for further analysis. Additionally, even if these authors are connected in terms of sustained criticism of each other's work, the selection of these three authors is always arbitrary to a certain degree. My justification for the texts and authors within this project is that they form a type of backwards dialogue that extends forward to the work of West and Wilderson. There is certainly no reason why these themes might not exist as far back as the slave narrative of Equiano or David Walker's appeal.
Some critics have even exchanged Wright for Amiri Baraka as a part of this conversation. My reasoning for leaving the work of Baraka out of this project is two-fold. First, Baraka's political commitments are much more determined and less fluid than Wright's *Native Son*, I would argue. In order to demonstrate the type of ambivalence I've elucidated within *Native Son* in the work of Baraka, I would have to visit various periods of Baraka's evolution from Leroi Jones, to Black Nationalism, and finally Third World Marxism to find either a trend of optimism or pessimism, or a transitional texts that demonstrates a political uncertainty. This endeavor would have certainly been productive, but required more sustained attention to Baraka than I could fit in the scope of this work along with the analysis of Ellison and Wright. Separately, and more interestingly, it came to my attention that the ideas of negativity and optimism within African American literature can be discussed from a different direction than the one I employ in this project. Although I strongly discourage it, one is tempted to place Wright on the side of pessimism, Ellison on the side of optimism, and Baldwin as a hopeful but questioning median. It is my hope that this work has problematized such simplicity. But rather than looking at these three canonical figures for this conversation, a different project could look to an evolution of a naturalist aesthetic within twentieth century African American literature. One can see the most recent manifestation of naturalism along this trajectory in the novel *Push* by Sapphire, and it would seem that the Black Aesthetic created within the Black Arts movement would have some role to play in that progression. As such, Baraka's inclusion in this project raises specters, questions and intellectual desires that would be difficult to restrain for the sake of the focus of this particular conversation.

While there is certainly more work to be done and questions to be addressed with respect to the influences of the literary past that inform black political intellectual production of the
present, this project accomplishes a few noteworthy things about the contemporary political commentary in the academy. For one thing, it has demonstrated the adage "there is nothing new under the sun." Neither West nor Wilderson are the creators of any form of optimism or pessimism within black culture, but rather, are explicating views established artistically and culturally at an earlier moment in the twentieth century. It is important to raise an important issue for all six authors (including Moten) addressed within this project: the present day relevance of the cultural and political work they perform. West has transitioned from an academic focused on issues of race from scholarly positions to a public intellectual with close attention to issues of class as a perhaps "more viable" strategy. Wilderson's work is so engaged with critical theory that only those with access to the academy could possibly know of his work or its relevance; similar things can be said for Moten. Indeed, all three of these scholars are critics of culture. It is possible that they are not inspiring political innovation and direction rather than documenting this inspiration as it occurs within cultural and artistic production. Critics within African American literary studies have gone back and forth on the issue of the political potential of art, and the relationship of art to politics. It is important to ensure that similar attention is given to the relationship of scholarship to politics. The dynamics that connect African American literature to politics are distinct from the issue of political scholarship, but the moment where the two collide presents interesting possibilities.

It is interesting that Moten, West and Wilderson each have a cultural element to their work, as Moten and Wilderson are creative writers and West is a public intellectual with a formidable degree of popularity. This suggests that even if the immediate effect of their scholarship does not profoundly inform mainstream black politics, it is a part of a broader project that certainly could. It is difficult to imagine West's appearance and influence among the
multicultural left absent his scholarly references and philosophical insights, such as his elucidation of "the funk of life" and his analogy of jazz and blues to democracy (a clear element of Ellison's thought). Similarly, Baldwin, Wright and Ellison were not only authors but respected intellectuals of their time. The impact of a text upon its author is important in both scholarly and literary moments. While we often focus on the way that authors can change politics through their texts, looking at this trend in a backwards manner is another direction for this mode of inquiry.

While none of the political prescriptions presented by the intellectuals and writers within this text are necessarily new, this work has shown that they continue to be relevant, and that even if the discussion of the texts does not directly impact politics, it can elucidate the legacies, tropes, and traditions of the present. It is important for intellectuals, public and scholarly alike, to draw from these conversations and histories in forming their own ideas. Doing so allows black writers and thinkers to borrow from the best of their traditions, and not only provide insight into political action and struggle of the present, but perhaps even generate new forms of engaging in that struggle.
Works cited


