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City Slums and the American Myth of Equal Opportunity as Told Through Naturalistic Literature

The second industrial revolution was marked by mass production made possible by the work of many unskilled workers from roughly 1860 to 1914 (the start of World War I). Some of these positions were often filled by people of color, making class ascension nearly impossible *especially* for women and people of color, as they were not really considered citizens. During the second industrial revolution women and people of color were usually not given the opportunity to move up to professions that required anything but unskilled labor. An example would be black auto-workers in Detroit experiencing massive prejudice ("Requiem for Detroit?" 14:15-14:33). This industry typically took place in cities and in these cities, slums housed many of these unskilled workers because they could not afford to live elsewhere. Slums often arise out of border vacuums which are areas like waterfront, highways, and parks that are only used for a single purpose. Border vacuums create dangerous areas around them because the streets near them are not populated, thus causing people to avoid being outside in those areas even more (Jacobs 259) . If people avoid going outside where they live, their children either do not have a safe place to go play outside or they simply avoid playing on the street altogether. Slums during this time were also often extremely crowded, creating unsafe living conditions and not many places to move for people of color specifically. Overcrowded neighborhoods are neighborhoods that tend to have quick turn-over rate, meaning people leave as soon as they get the chance. This denies that area any sense of community, therefore people tend to not care for each other, which

can make city streets unsafe (Jacobs 276-277). This kind of structure ensures that wealth usually remains generationally stagnant in families. While industry has made life significantly more convenient, it has also strengthened class divides, effectively showing the deceitful nature of the "American dream" for any American child without a well-off parent. Naturalism as a literary genre sought to document the gritty lives of poorer Americans and as a consequence it often chronicled the system that kept them that way.

The second industrial revolution or the "technological revolution" was the start of manufacturing, mass-production, and consumption (Edsforth 4-5). Ronald Edsforth, author of "A Second Industrial Revolution: The Transformation of Class, Culture, and Society in Twentieth-Century Flint, Michigan," asserts that the second industrial revolution improved the quality of life for the working class, thus easing class tensions. However "Neither the business class nor the working class has disappeared as a result of the second industrial revolution. In fact, in organizational terms, both classes are more clearly defined now than ever before" (Edsforth 12). Class divisions became more pronounced because people were used as tools or unskilled laborers in the grand-scheme of mass-production (Edsforth 4). Big businesses received help from the government and were thus "expected to" assist the state in its attempts to expand national power both at home and abroad" (Edsforth 5-6). With rich businessmen receiving government assistance, it makes sense that class placement would remain stagnant. In the *Communist Manifesto* Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels write:

> Hitherto, every form of society has been based, as we have already seen, on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes...The modern labourer, on the contrary, instead of rising with the process of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the

> conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. (20)

Gregory Mantsios, author of "Class in America," affirms the same thing: wealthy people stay generationally wealthy and poor people stay poor; significant upward mobility in the United States is nearly an unachievable goal (193). According to Sukkoo Kim, author of "Division of Labor and the Rise of Cities: Evidence from U.S. Industrialization, 1850-1880," "changes in technology and the rapid decline in transportation costs with the introduction of the railroads, unleashed Marshallian agglomeration economies which led industries to locate in cities" (471). Since industry was then mostly housed in cities, capitalists usually based their ventures in cities where people can work for them and buy their commodities. Therefore, one can expect more stark class divisions in cities because that is where industry is. Within the cities, then, there are the capitalists who own the means of production and the workers who work for them.

In his long speech in the third part of *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright, Boris Max accuses the Dalton family of being complicit in the system that ultimately led to the death of their daughter. This portion of his speech establishes the danger of grouping all of the most marginalized people in slums:

> 'I have only sympathy for those kind-hearted, white haired parents. But to Mr. Dalton, who is a real estate operator, I say now: 'You rent house to Negr***in the Black Belt and you refuse to rent to them elsewhere. You kept Bigger Thomas in that forest. You kept the man who murdered your daughter a stranger to her and you kept your daughter a stranger to him.'

> 'The relationship between the Thomas family and the Dalton family was that of renter to landlord, customer to merchant, employee to employer. The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton family got rich.' (*Native Son* 397)

This quotation embodies the central idea of this paper: due to industrialization, poor people, particularly poor people of color, stay poor and rich people stay rich, directly as a result of the U.S. economic structures that reinforce this system. Poor city planning enhances this issue. When an area is unsafe, it initiates a ripple effect where more and more areas become unsafe surrounding that area.

The following pages will analyze a few fictional American novels that refute the notion of the "American Dream" or the ability to pull oneself up by their bootstraps without a running start. These stories are intent on understanding the destructive power of social and economic structures in place that prove the absurdity of the "American Dream" for poorer citizens, particularly citizens of color. The outcome for all of the characters in the novels this essay will analyze, can be explained by the main idea of naturalist writer Émile Zola's "The Experimental Novel" which says that "Man is not alone; he lives in society, in a social condition; and consequently, for us novelists, this social condition unceasingly modifies the phenomena. Indeed our great study is just there, in the reciprocal effect of society on the individual and the individual on society" (20). The experiments written about in all of these novels show that the societal conditions in each of these major cities ultimately failed the working class, as they were destined for a life of servitude and attempting to escape that life only led to major consequences.

Female Autonomy and Alcoholism in *Maggie: a Girl of the Streets* (1893), by Stephen Crane

The Bowery in New York in the 1890s was mostly made up of immigrants, who served as the "unskilled" workers that allowed the industrial revolution in New York to flourish

(Romeyn 3-4). The elevated train that ran through the Bowery opened in 1878 and negatively impacted some businesses (Goldfield 95). The businesses that took over the Bowery after the noisiness of the elevated train pushed other businesses out were bars, dime shows, brothels, and pawn shops (Alexiou 136-138). Crane's novel itself describes the noisiness of the elevated train: "The begrimed windows rattled incessantly from the passing of the elevated train. This place was filled with a whirl of noises and odors" (32). Crane describes both a pawn shop and a dime show on the next page (33). The elevated train could be considered a border vacuum because it is a place used for only one purpose, thus creating a border. However, in order for it to be considered a border vacuum, the train would need to prevent people from going near that area, other than to use the train of course. According to Alice Sparberg Alexiou writer of *Devil's Mile: The Rich Gritty History of the Bowery*, once the elevated train was built, the Bowery "became the number-one destination for that age-old pastime, slum tourism. People went to the Bowery for fun spiked with danger, because, along with the tired and the poor, the Bowery embraced just about anything connected with vice, the number one business of New York in the Gilded Age" (Alexiou 137). The elevated train did not prevent people from going on the streets, but it did cause the streets to become more unsafe due to the businesses it attracted. According to *Street Scenes: Staging the Self in Immigrant New York, 1880-1924*, the Bowery was also an incredibly crowded area (Romeyn 4). Jacobs notes that overcrowding can make an area unsafe because it causes a high turnover of people who live there, therefore creating little sense of community (276-277). The children in *Maggie* are frequently on the streets with other children. The first page of the story describes Jimmie getting in a fight with other kids his age (Crane 7). While we cannot assert definitively that the elevated train in the Bowery during that time is a border vacuum, the sheer number of bars and other institutions surrounding Maggie and Jimmie at such

a young age created an unsafe environment for them to be brought up in, or at the very least negatively influenced them. For example, Jimmie ends up an alcoholic, just like his parents. Of course growing up in a home with alcoholic parents contributes to Jimmie's alcoholism, but being surrounded by bars certainly does not help. An area that is heavily concentrated in businesses like these creates an environment that hinders opportunity for social advancement. Maggie's conclusion proves this because she ends up dying as a prostitute, while attempting to escape her crippling home life (Crane 70-71). This is not to invalidate sex work as a whole, however, prostitution is arguably less safe than most other sex work because it is illegal and therefore prostitutes are not allotted the same protections as (say) a nude dancer.

Maggie: a Girl of the Streets features a number of scenes with extremely drunk people being violent or aggressive. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson are alcoholics who abuse each other and abuse their children (Crane 12-14). The way the Bowery and in particular their apartment is described feels absolutely miserable—as if taking up drinking is necessary in order to alleviate the tension of their situation (Baum 92). At one point Mr. Johnson says: "'My home reg'lar livin' hell! Damndes' place! Reg'lar hell! Why do I come an' drin' whisk' here thish way? 'Cause home reg'lar livin' hell!" (Crane 16). This is right after Jimmie had gone to get his mother beer and Mr. Johnson took the beer from him; because of this, Jimmie was too afraid to go home to his mother so he did not. Later when Mr. Johnson comes home, Jimmie goes past the door:

> There was a crash against the door and something broke into clattering fragments. Jimmie partially suppressed a howl and darted down the stairway. Below he paused and listened. He heard howls and curses, groans and shrieks, confusingly in chorus as if a battle were raging. With all was the crash of splintering furniture. The eyes of the urchin glared in fear that one of them would discover him. (Crane 16)

Aggression and drunkenness can be related, as we know from the common trope of the "angry drunk." In "Alcoholism and Family Abuse in *Maggie* and *The Bluest Eye"* Rosalie Murphy Baum discusses how the Johnson's alcoholism and abuse can be related to the family's socioeconomic status and their living conditions. She says that "drunken aggressiveness is likely to occur more frequently in subcultures in which individuals find that strongly established societal goals are unattainable—a correlation which is hardly surprising, given the consequent stress and loss of self-esteem as well as the lack of a sub-culturally approved alternative defense mechanism" (Baum 92). This drunken aggressiveness causes Maggie and Jimmie to feel unsafe at home, thus justifying their desire to escape their situation.

In general, the circumstances given to the Johnson children do not encourage them to rise above their current level of poverty. Education is not mentioned at all and based on the broken English the characters in *Maggie* speak, one can assume they are uneducated. Of course education is an integral part of social advancement and was widely unavailable for women during this time, especially if that woman did not have money. Socially, Maggie does not appear to have any friends other than Pete because she thinks about how she wishes she did have a friend she could talk about Pete with (Crane 33). Maggie's support system was virtually non-existent until Pete came into her life, therefore she sees him as her golden goose.

Any options Maggie had to escape her home life were also miserable and limited. In chapter eight Maggie imagines her future, distinguishing between two possibilities: one where she continues working and one with Pete. She worked in a shirt factory for a foreign capitalist that "sat all day delivering orations, in the depths of a cushioned chair. His pocketbook deprived them of the power of retort" (Crane 33). Maggie has little to no autonomy as a shirt factory

worker, being supported by a man like Pete in order to ascend classes is what she feels is her only way to escape her current situation:

> She wondered as she regarded some of the grizzled women in the room, mere mechanical contrivances sewing seams and grinding out, with heads bended over their work, tales of imagined or real girlhood happiness, past drunks, the baby at home, and unpaid wages. She speculated how long her youth would endure. She began to see the bloom upon her cheeks as valuable. (Crane 33)

Maggie wants Pete to rescue her from a life of "mechanical" working and abusive family life. In her mind, the options presented to her are to live a life of misery, or to be romantically swept away by Pete, a man that can rescue her from all of her problems. In these past few quotations, Crane shows that Maggie is capable of thinking about her own miserable situation and how she can attempt to exit her current situation. However, based on the very few times she speaks in broken English, there is no way her internal thoughts would not be composed of such a sophisticated analysis of her own life. Maggie seems capable of articulating her thoughts and desires but only on a very basic level, without well thought-out plans regarding how she can achieve those goals. Therefore, it is safe to assume the narrator interjects to a certain extent. In a moment of reflection Maggie (and perhaps the narrator) ponders her mother's alcoholism and abuse: " It seems that the world had treated this woman very badly, and she took a deep revenge upon such portions of it as came within her reach. She broke furniture as if she were at last getting her rights" (Crane 33). On a basic level, Maggie likely understands why her mother acts the way she does, or at least she understands she wants to break the cycle that she seems destined to repeat, but she is unable to realize that relying on Pete only brings her closer to repeating that cycle.

In desperation, Maggie relies on a future with Pete in an attempt to escape her family life. Maggie turning to Pete was seen as more socially unacceptable than her family's abusive behavior: "In turning to sex outside of marriage with Pete, to prostitution, and eventually to suicide, Maggie, of course, offends the code of conduct of her subculture and family. Parents may drink and fight, children may be beaten—these are comprehensible, even acceptable, behaviors. But young girls may not be 'ruined'" (Baum 97). After her relationship with Pete ends, she becomes "a girl of the streets" because she no longer has a home, fortifying the cyclical nature of being poor in the United States. This issue was compounded for women who were not even full citizens, as they did not even have the right to vote. Maggie's options were limited to working in a shirt factory and finding a man like Pete to support her. One of the plays Pete takes her to strongly reflects the hopes she has for her own life:

> Maggie always departed with raised spirits from the showing places of the melodrama. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually surmounted the wealthy and wicked. The theater made her think. She wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirty factory. (Crane 35)

Of course Maggie was naive to think that Pete would save her from her unfortunate life, but dreams of escaping are present in all of the novels this essay will discuss. Each character in these novels wants nothing more than to escape their situation, but their circumstances simply do not give them that chance.

Segregation in Chicago City Slums and the Failure of American Communism as Told by *Native Son* (1940), by Richard Wright

Industry settled into cities during the second industrial revolution. In the United States, capitalists became richer as workers became poorer, or stayed the same. The lifestyle changes caused by the second industrial revolution created the illusion that the working class was better off, but in reality today "both classes are [now] more clearly defined now than ever before. What has changed is not the existence of these two basic classes, but the character of their relationship and of class-consciousness itself" (Edsforth 12). In 2006, Mantsios wrote that the United States had some of the most pronounced class divisions in the industrialized world (185). Meaning the onset of massive consumerism in the United States created by the second industrial revolution did not help poor citizens in the long run.

American Communism did little to remedy this massive socioeconomic divide because the movement itself was flawed; as it was unable to recognize certain individual problems like advocating for black people specifically. This is evident in Wright's essay in the anthology *The God that Failed* where he details the discrimination and lack of support he experienced as a black communist. There is also no mention of race in *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels. Based on Wright's essay and that there is no actual mention of racial issues in *The Coummunist Manifesto*, Wright's criticism of the party seems justified. *Native Son* highlights this notion because Bigger lived in the Black Belt of Chicago, which is a border vacuum, perhaps leading Bigger to be involved in gang violence. The capitalist Mr. Dalton (among others) makes things very difficult for black people in Chicago by not letting them rent anywhere else other than the black belt, minimizing any chances for interclass contact and minimizing the opportunity for improving race relations. Bigger's predicament ultimately arises out of his frustration with the false notion of the "American dream."

Being poor is generationally cyclical; if one's parents are poor, a person will most likely also be poor; this is true in any family, *especially* in the United States. Mantsios claims that the United States has the largest gap in income between poor and rich citizens in the industrialized world (Mantsios 185). Stark class divisions in America stem from:

> capitalism, a system that is based on private rather than public ownership and control of commercial enterprises. Under capitalism, these enterprises are governed by the need to produce a profit for the owners, rather than to fulfill societal needs. Class divisions arise from the difference between those who own and control corporate enterprise and those who do not. (Mantsios 193-194).

When wealthy people pass their wealth to their offspring, the cycle of wealth continues for them, as the cycle of being poor persists for those they employ and their children. There are rare instances of "individuals who have gone from rags to riches abound in the mass media, [however,] statistics on class mobility show these leaps to be extremely rare" (Mantsios 193). Therefore, most individuals tend to stay at around the same class level as their family before them. These facts put the lie to the myth of "American dream." This dynamic is evident in *Native Son* through the relationship between the Dalton family and the Thomas family. As expressed in Max's court monologue: "'The relationship between the Thomas family and the Dalton family was that of renter to landlord, customer to merchant, employee to employer. The Thomas family got poor and the Dalton family got rich'" (*Native Son* 397). The stagnation of class mobility for those born into poor families is especially evident for black families, even more so in 1940 when the book was published.

This cycle of being poor is compounded for black families. In *Native Son,* Bigger and his family live in a rat-infested one room apartment, meanwhile the Dalton's live in an unnecessarily

large house (*Native Son* 43, 93-95). Merely because of the families they were born into, Bigger must find a way to support his family by becoming a chauffeur, while Mary Dalton is allotted the privilege of going to college (*Native Son* 90). Ultimately, Bigger's frustration with his situation leads to his own demise. The fictional story of Bigger Thomas reflects the stories of many young African American people. According to Wright's introduction to *Native Son* "How Bigger was Born," there were a plethora of Bigger-esque men he remembers from growing up, and their rebellious nature emerged out of their exclusion from the so-called "American dream." Men like Bigger were "trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life. In many respects his emergence as a distinct type was inevitable" ("How Bigger Was Born" 16). At the time, Black people in Chicago were segregated from white people. In *Native Son*, Black people were pushed into the Black-Belt: a decrepit neighborhood with exorbitantly high rents and little opportunity. This is confirmed in *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago 1940-1960* by Arnold Hirsch (8-18*)*. Mr. Dalton was one of the white people who facilitated this injustice as Max points out in his court monologue: "'to Mr. Dalton, who is a real estate operator, I say now: 'You rent houses to Negr*** in the Black Belt and you refuse to rent them elsewhere. You kept Bigger Thomas in that forest. You kept the man who murdered your daughter a stranger to her and you kept your daughter a stranger to him" (*Native Son* 397). This lack of communication between races, between rich and poor in cities like Chicago, continues the cycle of blacks being poor, and reinforces racist beliefs. Furthermore, the structure of a city itself can exacerbate the problem.

Chicago's Black Belt has multiple qualities that qualify it as a border vacuum based on Jane Jacobs' definition of a border vacuum. In Chicago's Black Belt these two borders are the

University of Chicago and Lake Michigan. This is where the idea of the vacuum comes in because the over-simplified use of the land near Lake Michigan and the University of Chicago expands: “The more infertile the simplified territory becomes for economic enterprises, the still fewer the users, and the still more infertile the territory. A kind of unbuilding or running-down process is set in motion” (Jacobs 259). When people feel that the city streets are unsafe, they tend to avoid them. If people avoid their city streets, or their neighbors then there is no randomized contact with new people. According to Jacobs, a lot of city planning structures depend on neighbors being friendly with each other usually only if they are of an upper-middle class background; otherwise, this strategy does not usually work. More commonly:

> In city areas that lack a natural and casual public life, it is common for residents to isolate themselves from each other to a fantastic degree. If mere contact with your neighbors threatens to entangle you in their private lives, or entangle them in yours, and if you cannot be so careful who your neighbors are as self-selected upper-middle-class people can be, the logical solution is absolutely to avoid friendliness or casual offers of help (Jacobs 65).

According to Jacobs, when people isolate themselves from each other in this way, neighborly duties like keeping an eye on children in the area are not seen as a responsibility. When streets are not seen as safe places for children to play, children are sent to parks. Parks also create border vacuums and house gang violence: “When the *New York Times* in September 1959 summed up the worst adolescent gang outbreaks of the past decade in the city, each and every one was designated as having occurred in a park” (Jacobs 76). If playing in a park and getting sucked into a gang is the only contact one is afforded as a child, it’s not surprising that children in these areas remain confined to violence and poverty by the limitations of their environment.

The issue of what Jacobs calls contact is also theorized in Samuel Delaney's *Time Square Red, Time Square Blue.* He manipulates the idea of contact to also address contact among different social classes, which could be manipulated even more to include contact between different races. As mentioned before in Jacobs' analysis, people tend to want to associate with people of the same social class—especially when one is of the upper-middle class. Delaney argues that contact among those of different classes is an important characteristic of a booming city street. Delaney differentiates between contact which usually occurs in a more public space, with networking which tends to happen in a more private space and is between people of the same social class (129). He rightfully critiques Jacobs' use of the word "contact," claiming in a footnote: "Astute as her analysis is, Jacobs still confuses contact with community. Urban contact is often at its most spectacularly beneficial when it occurs between members of *different* communities. That is why I maintain that interclass contact is even more important than intraclass contact" (Delaney 127). Contact among different classes is especially important for people of lower classes because it could perhaps provide them with opportunities they were likely not afforded without that contact. Meanwhile, interclass contact is also important for people of higher classes because it can dissolve some of their wrongfully acquired negative beliefs toward people of lower classes and lower-class areas (Delaney 126-127).

In a majority of the first section of *Native Son*, "Fear," Bigger Thomas is deprived of his individuality in order to work for the Dalton family. Bigger serves a function for them and that is what he must continue doing to provide for his family. When Mrs. Dalton asks Bigger what he wants to do and if he wants an education he has not really thought further ahead than providing for his family (*Native Son* 97-98). Providing for his family is all he can think about because powerful men like Mr. Dalton made that difficult for black families. Mr. Dalton donates millions

to black education funds and other charities to help black people in Chicago better themselves. He adopts Bigger as his driver in order to feel as if he is helping black people, meanwhile he overcharges rent in Chicago's blackbelt and refuses to allow them to live anywhere else because he says: "'Well, it's an old custom'" (*Native Son* 338). Donating to charity will not fix a system that intentionally segregated black people from white people. Similarly, Mary Dalton and her friend Jan attempt to recruit Bigger into the communist party, but Bigger is understandably suspicious of all white people (*Native Son* 109-112). During their first and only encounter together, Mary and Jan disregard many unspoken rules between black and white people without considering how the reversal of traditional social structures would make Bigger feel (*Native Son* 103). The misguided way Jan and Mary attempt to help Bigger and other black people by inviting him into the communist party ultimately fails because they ignore all previous relations between black and white people. Again, they ignore the systematic issues the United States has established to keep black people from progressing in society, as well as Bigger's individual struggles. At the same time, the Communists are not necessarily trying to help Bigger and other black people out of the goodness of their hearts: "'We can't have a revolution without 'em' Jan said 'They've got to be organized. They've got spirit. They'll give the Party something it needs'" (*Native Son* 111). By doing this, they idealistically ignore the real issues Bigger is facing, like feeding his family and bettering himself, expecting him to skirt around Mr. Dalton's orders and listen to their all-knowing "helpful" authority, much like the Communist party itself during this time.

Native Son was published in 1940, soon after Wright's split from the Communist party (Robinson 48). For the most part, the novel was critical of the Communist party; despite Max's inspiring and heartfelt speech, in the end he fails to fully connect to Bigger himself. Overall,

Max was working in favor of the party, and the party served the interests of the proletariat, which included black people, but failed to acknowledge their problems as a race. As Max said: "'in the work I'm doing, I look at the world in a way that shows no whites and no blacks, no civilized and no savages. . . . When men are trying to change human life on earth those little things don't matter. You don't notice 'em. They're just not there. You forget them'" (*Native Son* 422). This color-blind attitude does not totally reflect Wright's experience in the Communist Party, as he explained in his essay in the anthology *The God that Failed*. However, the sentiment seems to be more that the proletariat, including black people, are struggling together and must unite. This idea comes from a good place, but communists needed to first address the issues of the most vulnerable members of society, such as black people. From the beginning of his endeavors with the Party, Wright "felt that Communists could not possibly have a sincere interest in Negr***. I was cynical and I would rather have heard a white man say that he hated Negr***, which I could have readily believed, that to have heard him say that he respected Negr***, which would have made me doubt him" (*The God that Failed* 116). As Wright became further involved with the Party, they suspected him of having interests outside of the party's because they considered him to be an "intellectual" despite the fact that he only completed grammar school and was otherwise completely self-taught. They threatened him saying: "'We've kept records of the trouble we've had with intellectuals in the past. It's estimated that only 13% of them remain in the party'" (*The God that Failed* 128). Wright also soon learned that opposing the party in any capacity was not okay either. One of the last straws was when he went to a congress of American writers in New York in 1935 and the Party members there had not made housing arrangements for him, a black communist: "I stood on the sidewalks of New York with a black skin and practically no money, absorbed, not with the burning questions of the left-wing literary movement in the United States,

but with the problem of how to get a bath" (*The God that Failed* 138). His growing hostility toward the Communist Party seeps into his complicated representation of them in *Native Son* through the ignorant elitism of Mary and Jan, and through Max's ultimate misunderstanding of Bigger's attitude of contentment in the end.

In his essay "Richard Wright and the Communist Party—The James T. Farrell Factor," Alvin Starr claims that Wright is advocating for communism or something like it, which may be true (47). However, *Native Son* is definitely critical of the Communist Party. As Cedric J. Robinson wrote in his essay "Richard Wright and the Critique of Class Theory":

> Wright was also critical of Marxism, the second and more modern radical Western tradition. It, too, was profoundly limited theoretically, and subject to the abuses of narrow political interests. Marxism had ultimately failed to come to terms with nationalism, with consciousness, with racism, with Western civilization, with industrialization, and with the history of Blacks. (57)

Of course Wright seemed to hold some of the fundamental Marxist beliefs. However, he "maintained that the purposes of Marxism as employed in American Communism were less analytical than political. The result was neither theory nor praxis but the achievement of power" (Robinson 57). What Wright seemed to identify with was Marx's focus on uplifting the most marginalized members of society like the lower class and closing the substantial financial gap between the poorest and the richest members of society.

Bigger ultimately fails to escape his situation through the opportunities presented to him by the Dalton family because he barely had a chance in the first place. Discrimination towards blacks was rampant during this time, therefore they were awarded little opportunities and forced into slums like the Black Belt of Chicago that prevented them from bettering themselves or

really escaping their situation. He killed Mary in fear of the consequences he may experience as a black man in a white woman's room. After killing Mary everything spiraled out of control: Bigger's fate was determined and any effort he made to escape his fate only made his situation worse.

The moment that defined Bigger's future was the moment he killed Mary Dalton. Bigger had no choice in the matter of escorting Mary to her room because it was simply the right thing to do for a person that intoxicated (*Native Son* 117-118). Yes, it was probably wrong for him to kiss her when she kissed him, but he should not have been afraid for his life for kissing a white woman (*Native Son* 118-119). When Mrs. Dalton came in, Bigger acted out of fear and suffocated Mary. That fear was justified, based on the discrimination aimed at black people in the 1930s. This is further illustrated by the way Bigger reacts when Mrs. Dalton walked in and "a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream. A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body. It was Mrs. Dalton. He wanted to knock her out of his way and bolt from the room" (*Native Son* 119). This moment alone proves that making Mrs. Dalton blind was a strategic choice. Bigger, a young man who should not be physically intimidated by Mrs. Dalton in any way is terrified of the power she has over him. Bigger panicked thinking about what might happen if he was caught in Mary's bed. His reaction was to hide his presence at all costs, little did he know this moment would define the rest of his life. Even before this moment, most of Bigger's choices were determined by other people. He had to take Mary where she wanted to go (*Native Son* 99). He was practically forced to eat with Jan and Mary (*Native Son* 106-107). He had to take this job in the first place, in order to help his family (*Native Son* 50). Of course he did not have to go to

such great and brutal lengths to hide what he did to Mary, but he wanted to save his life so he tried everything he could do to continue living his life normally, to no avail.

Native Son depicts the lack of choices for a black man in America in the 1930s. Wright symbolizes the failure of American communism to extend an arm to African American citizens. Communism was more focused on helping the proletariat as a whole, without acknowledging the individual needs of some of the most disadvantaged citizens within the proletariat. As explained in "How Bigger was Born," Bigger is a symbol for so many young African American men from the 1930s unable to escape the social forces preventing them from living out their own version of the "American dream."

The Difficulty of Black Motherhood in *The Street* (1946), by Ann Petry

The Street by Ann Petry follows the life of a single black mother in the 1940s. Lutie Johnson does nothing but work hard in the hopes of one day moving to a better street for her son Bub. Much of the novel details of Lutie's thought processes of saving money as much as possible and working as hard as she can in order to pass more civil service examinations so that she can make more money and eventually afford a better apartment for her and her son Bub (Petry 54-57). Much like the other novels, *The Street* focuses on escaping the slums of a major American city, in this case Harlem in New York City.

Throughout the novel, Lutie really dislikes Bub playing out on the street like other kids his age because she thinks it is unsafe. Lutie wants Bub to amount to something, to not have to go through what she is forced to go through. At one point, Bub sets up a shoe shine stand outside in order to make more money because his mother talks about it a lot and she gets upset: "'You see, colored people have been shining shoes and washing clothes and scrubbing floors for years and years. White people seem to think that's the only kind of work they're fit to do. The hard

work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least'" (Petry 70). She later explains that he might become stuck doing something like shining shoes if he starts at eight years old (Petry 71). This behavior crushes Lutie because it is the beginning of everything she wants to shelter Bub from. Lutie understands the restricting forces of determinism in her life more than any other character this essay will discuss. She does everything she can to try and stop these social forces from corrupting her life. As argued in "Urban Freedom and Uncontained Space in American Literary Naturalism": "Lutie sees herself as a woman surrounded—one who is enclosed, trapped, circumscribed by social and spatial forces out of her control" (Greco 194). However, at the same time Lutie wants to believe that she has a chance to escape these conditions. Lutie wants "The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough" (Petry 43) to apply to her. The fantasy of this belief is mostly inspired by the Pizzini family she worked for because they want her and other people like her to believe they have a chance; preservation of the myth of the "American dream" benefits them (Petry 43). In the end, Mr. Junto offers Lutie the chance to ascend classes, but only at the cost of selling her body, and losing her pride along the way. She is frankly not given any other choice than to give in to Mr. Junto so she kills Boots after he tries to force her to have sex with both him and Mr. Junto (Petry 428-430). Afterwards, Lutie flees New York, leaving Bub with the state (Petry 434-436).

In the end, Bub's fate is decided ultimately by the social forces out of Lutie's control; his fate is decided by their street and those that inhabit it. The antagonist of the story is the super of their building Jones meticulously plans ways to make Lutie have sex with him through her son Bub, but eventually just gets Bub in trouble for stealing mail (Petry 381-384). One could argue that these aren't social forces at play, but the actions of a few misguided men. However, Jones

projects his own frustration about his life situation onto Lutie and Bub. Powerful men like Mr. Junto preying on women like Lutie are not all that uncommon.

Lutie is even more self-aware than Maggie, but that does not change her situation. Maggie is less educated than Lutie, which contributes to her lack of self-awareness. However, Lutie of course is a black single mother, which means those additional social forces are working against her. Maggie and Lutie ended up in similar situations, in fact all of the young female characters in this essay (Maureen, Lutie, and Maggie) end up at the very least being prompted to sell their bodies. Poor women being sexually exploited is a common theme among all of these novels and self-awareness does little to combat the external forces working against poor women.

According to *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* by Gilbert Osofsky, descendants of former slaves moved to New York during the second industrial revolution in order to take advantage of the new jobs available to them (23-29). Around the 1920s is when Harlem started becoming a slum. One of the reasons Harlem became a slum during this time was because black people started moving there in high volume (Osofsky 128). Due to the high volume of people moving to Harlem, rent prices started rising: “High rents and poor salaries necessarily led to congested and unsanitary conditions. The average Negr* Harlemite in the 1920’s, as in the 1890’s, held some menial or unskilled position which paid low wages--work which was customarily ‘regarded as Negr* jobs’” (Osofosky 136). These conditions, paired with the discrimination that prevented black people from obtaining anything other than an unskilled position, made upward mobility unachievable. This was compounded by black people not being able to choose where they live because of segregation: “The most important factor which led to the rapid deterioration of Harlem housing was the high cost of living in the community. Rents, traditionally high in Harlem, reached astounding proportions in the 1920’s—they skyrocketed in response to the

unprecedented demand created by heavy Negr* migration and settlement within a restricted geographical area" (Osofosky 136). Harlem, as a geographical area is bordered by water and Central Park—two spaces with only a single use and thus can be considered border vacuums (Jacobs 259). As previously mentioned, border vacuums can make streets unsafe and this is evident in *The Street* through Lutie's fears of Bub wandering the streets of Harlem. These fears are clearly justified because Jones preys on Bub's naivety while nobody really intervenes. However, the main problem with border vacuums is that they make city streets less populated, and the streets of Harlem are described as anything but empty in *The Street:* "It looked, she thought, like any other New York City street in a poor neighborhood. Perhaps a little more down-at-the-heels. The windows of the houses were dustier and there were more small stores on it than on streets in other parts of the city. There were also more children playing in the street and more people walking about aimlessly" (Petry 63). The park, however, could be an issue because parks are the place where a lot of gang violence occurred during that time (Jacobs 76). Lutie even thinks that she should move somewhere without a park or playground nearby, when thinking about potential after-school activities for Bub (Petry 78). The cramped nature of Harlem, or any slum for that matter is a city planning issue that can lead to dangerous streets. According to Jacobs, Harlem was (during this time at least) one of these "perpetual slums" because successful people tend to leave an overcrowded area as soon as they can "leave a community in a perpetually embryonic stage, or perpetually regressing to helpless infancy. The age of buildings is no index to the age of a community, which is formed by a continuity of people" (Jacobs 277). Therefore, the cramped Harlem streets, segregation, racism and the issue of the park as a potential border vacuum combine to diminish any chances its inhabitants like

Lutie or Bub have to climb socioeconomic classes and keep them there to continue working for the rich.

Mental Illness in *Them* (1969), by Joyce Carol Oates

On a surface level those born into poor homes obviously face economic disadvantages, but there are further, not so obvious barriers the poor must overcome to ascend classes. Mental illness is more heavily concentrated among the poor (Wilton 26). Stress caused by both not having money and mental illness does not establish a nurturing environment for children born into poor families: "The material deficits of poverty can indirectly lead to child abuse and neglect through parental stress, and directly by merely presenting the situations that are harmful to children, with the parents' failure or inability to protect the child being called neglect" (Pelton 34). Children learn a lot by observing. Therefore, a child with abusive or neglectful parents is prone to repeating those behaviors: "Parents with maltreatment histories are more likely to repeat maltreatment of their own children, and dysfunctional parenting may repeat in subsequent generations" (Bögels, Hellemans, van Deursen, Römer and van der Meulen 537). A common bodily response to trauma or abuse is the development of a dissociative disorder (*DSM-5* 304). Dissociative disorders are characterized as "a disruption of and/or discontinuity in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body representation, motor control, and behavior" (*DSM-5* 291). There are multiple dissociative disorders, but Loretta, Jules and Maureen show signs of Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder (DPD). DPD is described as repetitive instances of depersonalization, derealization or potentially both (*DSM-5* 302). Depersonalization is defined as "Experiences of unreality, detachment, or being an outside observer with respect to one's thoughts, feelings, sensations, body, or actions (e.g., perceptual alterations, distorted sense of time, unreal or absent self, emotional and/ or physical numbing)"

(*DSM-5* 302). Derealization occurs when a person has a similar feeling of detachment, however, in relation to one's environment, rather than body, meaning that surrounding people and objects can appear visually distorted (*DSM-5* 302). The "emotional numbing" part of Depersonalization may even perpetuate violence in some, due to a lack of empathy:

> Among men convicted of domestic violence the amount of dissociative phenomena (e.g., watching self from a distance, feeling unable to show sympathy for partner's pain, blacking out) occurring during the commission of assaultive behavior was positively related to the frequency of assaultive behavior. (Singh Narang and Contreas 696)

In *Them*, as a result of repetitive trauma and abuse caused by the conditions of poverty, Loretta, Jules and Maureen all develop DPD. Their DPD cripples their hopes and dreams of bettering themselves, forcing them to repeat the cycle of poverty, abuse and mental health issues.

Them begins with a look into Loretta's developmental years, years that traumatized her and lead to her developing DPD. Insight on Loretta's childhood was important because it humanizes her later abusive behavior towards her children, further supporting the idea that the cycle of poverty, abuse and mental illness is entirely dictated by uncontrollable environmental conditions. In the first couple chapters, Oates paints a picture of Loretta's childhood home life: her mother died when she was eleven (*Them* 14), her family has a history of being mentally ill, and she has stepped in to the maternal role of taking care of her older brother Brock, who is abusive to her, at the ripe age of sixteen (*Them* 8).The opening scene describes Loretta looking into the mirror in love with herself and the way she looks:

> Upon her competent shoulders sat this fluttery, dreamy head, blond hair puffed out and falling down in coquettish curls past her ears, past her collar, down onto her back, so that when she ran along the sidewalk it blew out behind her and men stopped to stare at her;

> never did she bother to glance back at these men—they were like men in movies who do not appear in the foreground but only focus interest, show which way interest should be directed. (*Them* 3-4)

The "dreaminess" of this opening scene already suggests derealization, while the thought of men who stop to stare at her being like "men in movies" is a symptom of depersonalization: she is experiencing reality as "unreality" (*DSM-5* 302). Later in life, out of obligation Loretta settles and marries a man she does not love. While she is first married to Howard she thinks: "She herself did not think about love any longer, but she liked the music and she went around singing the words. Life had stopped for her and she could relax, sleep" (*Them* 46). Not being able to love or "emotional numbing" is a symptom frequently associated with DPD: "It can be seen from the above that the phenomenon of 'deaffectualization' or emotional numbing has been consistently described as a core feature of the syndrome" (Medford 140). Loretta even feels somewhat emotionally numb toward her own children by both abusing and neglecting them, causing them to also develop DPD. Loretta continues the cycle of abuse with Jules, causing him to develop DPD.

As a child, Jules had a lot more energy than Loretta's other children. Loretta was unsure of how to handle all of five-year-old Jules' energy, so "When he got too noisy sometimes Loretta gave him a few swallows of beer, in exasperation, to quiet him down" (*Them* 60). Giving a five-year-old beer is physical abuse. Note that it was "in exasperation," so Loretta carried out this abuse because she was tired and stressed. Trauma and abuse have a lasting impact on the sponge-like minds of children. Trauma and abuse can be the root cause of DPD: "Childhood interpersonal trauma as a whole was highly predictive of both a diagnosis of depersonalization disorder and of scores denoting dissociation, pathological dissociation, and depersonalization"

(Simeon, Guralnik, Schmeidler, Sirof and Knutelska 1027). The conditions of poverty, one being the frequent experience of trauma, forced Jules to grow up more quickly than most. Jules' family is poor so when he is twelve: "he was up much of the night and after school he had to work, but still he was lively and enthusiastic, and only when the drill of catechism and history and grammar began did his mind begin to go" (*Them* 83). Having to work at night causes Jules to start caring less about school, despite having dreams of a better life (*Them* 105). On top of having familial abuse problems, one particular kind of abuse or trauma all of the main characters seem to endure is sexual trauma. When Jules is twelve he is raped statutorily by an eighteen-year-old. After their sexual encounter is over the girl says: "'Now you love me'" (*Them* 94). Jules begins to equate sex to love or at least the love he feels for other people. The sexual abuse Jules experiences when he was twelve explains later symptoms of DPD. Along with Loretta and Maureen, Jules does not understand what it means to be in love. It seems that Jules is only in love with the idea of anything better than himself, explaining his unusual relationship with Nadine: "His lust for one girl (Nadine) flowered generously over them all; if he had fallen in love with Bernard's niece, he had fallen in love with all the nieces and daughters of the Pointes, those fair-skinned, thoughtful girls with their shining clean hair" (*Them* 275). Based on this quote, Jules' feelings towards Nadine are solely dependent on the one time he briefly saw her walking outside of his car window. Here it is important to note the use of the word "lust" as opposed to the word "love" because it seems that Jules grows to equate love and lust. He is "in love" with the women of the Pointes, or the women of higher status than him, the women who could help him exit poverty (*Them* 275). He even blacks out during sex and essentially rapes Nadine which is not uncommon for men with Dissociative disorders:

> Among men convicted of domestic violence, the amount of dissociative phenomena (e.g., watching self from a distance, feeling unable to show sympathy for partner's pain, blacking out) occurring during the commission of assaultive behavior was positively related to the frequency of assaultive behavior. (Singh Narang and Contreras 696)

Jules' abuse then goes on to negatively affect others, continuing the cycle of abuse that thwarts success. Maureen, Loretta's daughter, was also permanently damaged from her mother's childhood abuse and neglect.

The character of Maureen, perhaps, is the most obvious embodiment of DPD in *Them.* Maureen is the exemplary child: she does well in school, doesn't get in trouble and as early as thirteen she begins doing housework her mother fails to do (*Them* 138). Yet again, one of the characters is forced to grow up too quickly, due to parental lacking or neglect. Maureen's additional responsibilities cause her to not sleep adequately, so she loses focus in school: "She stared at these pictures, aware of having failed though she was still young; her failure was tied up somehow with her being unable to sleep" (*Them* 181). Not only does Loretta force Maureen to grow up too quickly by taking over her motherly duties, but for some reason she lies about Maureen, saying she does things like cut school, lie about going to the library and steal Loretta's lipstick. This turns into its own strange form of abuse. Loretta was so convinced that Maureen was stealing her lipstick that she buys Maureen her own lipstick (*Them* 186). However, Loretta later lies to Furlong, telling him that Maureen stole the lipstick. This initiates an argument between Furlong and Maureen, while Loretta remains silent in the other room: "He turned suddenly, with an effort, and slapped her. He hit her on the side of the face, a surprise to them both" (*Them* 193). After this encounter, Maureen feels that she must urgently leave home. She understands that she needs to work in order to leave home, but Loretta will not allow her so she

resorts to prostitution (*Them* 206). During sex, Maureen experiences depersonalization as shown by the sense of detachment she feels from her own body. After saving money for a while, Furlong finds the money after seeing Maureen with the man she prostitutes herself to. It is unclear if Furlong insinuates Maureen is a prostitute or if he thought that she stole his own money. Regardless, Furlong tries to kill Maureen and ends up in jail (*Them* 232). Right after nearly dying Maureen dissociates: "*when she turns and sees her self step out of her body, with a sudden convulsive movement, freeing itself, escaping. This self is her. It steps down to the sidewalk again, pushing past other people who want to get on the bus. It glances back up at her*" (*Them* 228). It is not uncommon for somebody who experienced a near death situation to experience some form of depersonalization (Medford 141). Maureen's DPD shows signs of "deaffectualization." Not only is Maureen traumatized by nearly dying, but she is traumatized by her recent and somewhat forced sexual experiences. Maureen's depersonalization shows that, like Jules, she also has trouble connecting who she wants to be and who she is through the means of relationships. Maureen has an even more odd outlook on love and relationships than Jules because rather than confusing love and lust, Maureen just does not love men, even the man she marries: "Toward men she could really feel no love, not really. She would have a baby with her husband, to make up for the absence of love, to locate love, to fix herself in a certain place, but she would not really love him" (*Them* 433). Maureen's inability to love demonstrates the "emotional numbing" of depersonalization (Medford 142). Maureen's life is eerily similar to Loretta's, for the novel ends with Maureen pregnant living with a man she does not love as a housewife (*Them* 536-538). Despite all of her childhood efforts in school, Maureen falls into a never ending cycle of poverty, where mental illness is all too common. In *Them* Maureen's ambition to become more than her mother is thwarted by her mother and stepfather's abuse. This

abuse causes her to develop and exhibit clear symptoms of DPD. Therefore, Maureen is representative of the inescapable hold poverty has on its victims.

The novel ends during the Detroit race riots of 1967. On television Jules says: “It is only necessary to understand that fire does it duty, perpetually, and the fires will never be put out--” (*Them* 532-533). This quote seems to apply well to the Wendall family’s development of DPD because once the seeds of abuse and trauma were put into place, the disorder performed its duty and crippled them into static lives, much as the “fire” or the conditions that caused the riots “did its duty” and burned the city.

In Detroit, successful implementation of the assembly line for the production of Ford Model T initiated an economic boom of colossal proportions. The BBC documentary “Requiem for Detroit?” documents the rise and fall of the motor city in great detail: “Detroit fell in love with the wealth produced by the single industry, a seemingly inexhaustible golden goose which determined the motor city’s explosive growth. And so the destinies of Detroit and the car were fatally entwined. Together, they set off on the highway of the future and drove to the end of the line” (“Requiem for Detroit?” 6:55-7:15). Ford was one of the first industrial businessmen to employ the tactic of using unskilled workers in an assembly line where each only completed one task over and over again; a monotonous process one person in the documentary compared to doing prison time (“Requiem for Detroit?” 9:50-10:00). Eventually the “big three” automakers in Detroit (Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler) started creating suburbs around Detroit where wealthy people tended to live, “By redrawing the map of the rapidly expanding city, the auto barons were able to siphon the wealth out of Detroit and pay taxes into the coffers of their own private fiefdoms.” (“Requiem for Detroit?” 10:35-10:44). In 1914, Ford doubled the average wage to $5 causing an influx of about 10,000 new people to the city (“Requiem for Detroit?”

12:03-12:24). By paying people more money, Ford turned the average worker into a consumer, making the car a driving force in the creation of the consumer society established in the second industrial revolution. According to Detroit artist Lowell Boileau "It was good money. People could come to Detroit, they could ascend to the middle class" ("Requiem for Detroit?" 13:25-13:29). Eventually Ford even allowed black people to come and work in the plants, which was considered progressive at the time ("Requiem for Detroit?" 13:30-14:30). However, the segregation and racism omnipresent in all of America at the time was no different in Detroit. Ford literally created different towns for the white and black workers to live in ("Requiem for Detroit?" 14:33-14:36). In 1929 the depression hit Detroit hard after a massive amount of people migrated to the city, which led to the creation of the United Automobile workers (UAW) ("Requiem for Detroit?" 19:05-20:20). World War II generated business in Detroit: "During World War II, Detroit was the center of all manufacturing. This was the arsenal of democracy, as they called it. Hundreds of thousands of people flooded into the city to work here ("Requiem for Detroit?" 21:45-22:01). When the war was over Detroit's success continued as consumerism became more and more ingrained into American Culture. During this time, the suburbs of Detroit started building up and thus the first freeways were created ("Requiem for Detroit?" 30:05-30:29). White people moved to the suburbs and black people stayed in the city. In order to even get out of the city really one had to own a car, so the financial barrier of owning a car was really what drew the racial lines ("Requiem for Detroit?" 31:03-31:10). After white people mostly moved out of Detroit, the police became increasingly militant toward black people and police brutality was rampant. In 1967 the Detroit race riots occurred: over the course of seven days 43 people were killed ("Requiem for Detroit?" 36:40-38:21). According to author and activist Grace Lee Boggs: "'67 was not a race riot, '67 was a righteous uprising against police brutality."

("Requiem for Detroit?" 36:20-36:38). After that racial divisions became clearer than ever before. The divide that serves as somewhat of a border vacuum is the famous Eight Mile Road: "While people were moving out, there was an eight mile demarcation point. Almost like a Great Wall of China, and it separated, literally, the suburbs from the city" ("Requiem for Detroit?" 39:16-39:44). Detroit was built with the intention that everybody would have a car, which of course created a financial blockade for black people and the other people living in the city.

As we know from Jacobs' Assessment not only do the highways make it difficult for people to leave the cities, but they create a lot of space only used for one reason. When a lot of space is only used for one reason, that space will become increasingly less populated. As we know once a space becomes less populated it becomes less safe. This produces a vacuum effect because if one area is unsafe and people avoid it eventually they will start to avoid the surrounding areas. People say Detroit never recovered after the 1967 riots, which may be true, but the city itself was not built for lower income people (that don't have cars), yet a lot of them live there after being encouraged to move to work in the auto industry. In her book *Uncensored* Oates writes in "*Them* Revisited" that "a stinging sulfurous smoke-haze would hang over the city for days, in the grip of a heat wave; the stink of burning things would seem to pervade the remainder of our lives in Detroit, and no one who lived through, or even near, the 1967 riot would ever feel that Detroit was a "safe"—or even "sane"—place in which to reside" ("Them Revisited" 345). *Them* is the story of the influence the "American dream" had on poor people, despite that dream not really applying to people like them. Cities like Detroit were built for industry, not for people and when areas meant to house masses of people are built merely off of the desires of only a few, the social consequences cannot be understated. These social consequences are portrayed vividly through the lives of the Wendall family in *Them*, according

to Mary Kathryn Grant author of the essay "The Tragic Loss of Community in the City" in *The Tragic Vision of Joyce Carol Oates:* "The failure to create a community in the city is an irrefutable fact for which multifarious reasons, are advanced: heartless commercialism, ruthless competition, constant mobility, personal alienation, poverty, and crime" (Grant 64). Without a community, areas become even more unsafe because people detach themselves from others for reasons of survival (Jacobs 65). Jules Wendall embodies this sentiment of wanting to escape his poor life, he almost does not understand how to love which could be explained by his struggle with mental illness. His understanding of love is that he loves anything that may help him escape his situation, or he is in love with any person that he deems better than himself. The case of Maureen is perhaps the most tragic because her potential was very directly thwarted by parental influence. She wanted to escape abuse at home so she turned to sex work at a very young age which ultimately led to more severe abuse. The severity of her situation called for an immediate escape from her home, but the toxic environment pulled her in further (*Them* 196-228).

Equal Access to Education: A Tool for Ascending Classes

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets by Stephen Crane, *Native Son* by Richard Wright, *The Street* by Ann Petry, and *Them* by Joyce Carol Oates all demonstrate that ascending classes while starting in the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy in the United States is extremely difficult, or nearly impossible depending on one's circumstances. Class ascension is impeded by conditions like race, gender, poor city planning, and policies meant to keep poorer citizens poor so they can continue to work for capitalists who make more and more money.

In *Maggie,* Crane illustrates how a woman in the Bowery in the 1890s was thwarted from bettering her life by the ripple effect of her family's frustrations of living in a slum. Their alcoholism and abuse cause Maggie to seek out support from Pete, who left her with nothing.

Without any community, Maggie could not lift herself up and died tragically. The overcrowding in the Bowery as well as the high concentration of bars and brothels combined to produce the living conditions that ultimately destroyed Maggie in a way that was out of her control, especially for a woman during this time.

In *Native Son,* Wright captures the insufferable conditions for African Americans during the 1930s in the Black Belt of Chicago, as well as the hypocrisy of the Communist party during this time. Housing in the Black Belt of Chicago was sparse and rent was grossly overpriced, yet black people were not able to go anywhere else. The Communist party in a way attempted to reach out to black people, but only in an effort to help their own movement, which the novel depicts fantastically through Mary Dalton's ignorance, and Boris Max's inability to understand Bigger. In the end, Bigger's life is destroyed by his fears of being unfairly discriminated against as a black man.

In *The Street,* Petry describes the unique struggle of a single black mother and her son in Harlem in the 1940s. Lutie works tirelessly and almost does nothing but think about how she can ascend classes in order to move to a safer street to raise her son Bub. In the end, the overcrowding in Harlem destroyed any sense of community, which made it possible for the super Jones to foil all of Lutie's plans to better her and Bub's lives and for people like Mr. Junto to take advantage of women like Lutie with little or no consequences. Ultimately, the lack of community destroyed Lutie's family and future.

In *Them,* Oates depicts a family ravaged by mental illness and the economic devastation of Detroit during the mid 20th century. Loretta, Maureen, and Jules all appear to suffer from DPD after the severe trauma and abuse they each experienced during their childhood. Loretta's de-affectualization made her a bad parent, passing her worries on to her children, stripping them

of their childhood. Maureen then stopped caring about school and started caring about escaping her household, and Jules started worrying about providing for his household. Both go on to exhibit symptoms of DPD that prevent them from living their lives in the ways they initially wanted to. Meanwhile the three of them had no sense of community in Detroit because of the border vacuums created by the highways that trapped them there to work for the capitalists that ran Detroit.

All of these stories depict how city slums exacerbate the cycle of low-class standing in families, inevitably thwarting the success of children. Remember, according to Mantsios: "Although examples of individuals who have gone from rags to riches abound in the mass media, statistics on class mobility show these leaps to be extremely rare. In fact, dramatic advances in class standing are relatively infrequent. One study showed that fewer than one in five men surpass the economic status of their fathers" (193). This socioeconomic divide was particularly evident in cities after the second industrial revolution made commercialism and mass-production widespread.

Unfortunately, the "American Dream" is still a myth and class ascension is still thwarted by a lack of support for poorer families raising their children. If anything economic inequality has gotten worse:

> One of today's most pressing economic issues is the worrisome level of income inequality. Since 1979, the total share of income claimed by the bottom 90 percent of Americans has steadily decreased. In 1979, that 90 percent received about 67 percent of cash, market-based income (i.e., pretax income). By 2015, their share had decreased to about 52 percent of pretax income. The majority of income gains during this period went to the top 1 percent. Polls reflect widespread concern about income and wage inequalities

> and associated trends and the desire for policies to address these inequalities. (García and Weiss)

Meanwhile, less and less children surpass the socioeconomic status of their parents (García and Weiss). The cycle of stagnation in socioeconomic status in families is becoming more and more concrete. Education is perhaps one of the most important tools for remedying the massive socioeconomic inequalities plaguing this country. It is well known that a successfully educated individual is more likely to be financially successful. Therefore, disparities in access to education for poorer children make class ascension difficult. "Education Inequalities at the School Starting Gate: Gaps Trends and Strategies to Address Them" states that "Extensive research has conclusively demonstrated that children's social class is one of the most significant predictors—if not the single most significant predictor—of their educational success" (García and Weiss). This is another indication that the "American Dream" is only reality for the rich and that deterministic forces outside of our control dictate people's futures. One might argue that parenting style impacts educational success for children. However, in *The Street*, we see how socioeconomic status affects Lutie's time to parent. Lutie spends all of her time trying to make a better life for her child, which means that Bub does not always get the attention he might need (Petry 54-57). Lastly, there is often less school funding in poorer areas, often poorer areas concentrated in minorities:

> The African American journey can also be traced to still separate/still unequal educational experiences that reproduce economic, political, and social inequalities. African Americans in predominantly Black schools confront inequalities in per-pupil spending, well qualified teachers, harsher discipline, and access to advanced placement courses. (Lofton and Davis 217)

Unequal access to education may be one of the main reasons there is such a significant generational socioeconomic divide in the United States. In cities like New York, this issue is worse than most places in the country:

> New York's record on school segregation by race and poverty is dismal now and has been for a very long time. The children who most depend on the public schools for any chance in life are concentrated in schools struggling with all the dimensions of family and neighborhood poverty and isolation. In spite of the epic struggle for more equitable funding in New York, there is a striking relationship between segregated education and unequal school success. (Kucsera and Orfield iii)

School segregation based on both race and socioeconomic status is one of the most tangible examples that justifies this paper's reasoning because the educational system is just one institution working to reinforce the cyclical nature of poverty, bringing to light the sham of the "American Dream."

As a genre, naturalism uncovers these injustices by creating a narrative surrounding the people suffering from conditions that are actively working against them. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, *Native Son*, *The Street*, and *Them* put names to the faces of the generational nature of socioeconomic disadvantage in cities in the United States. Poor Americans struggle with sexism, racism, parenting, and mental illness with less support than richer citizens, which further disadvantages them.

The "American Dream" will never come into fruition in the United States without major structural changes to the way our system operates. Our current system is not equal, it uplifts few people at the expense of others. In the United States, people of color, poor people, and women are not given equal opportunity to achieve their goals. As the American economy grows on the

shoulders of its industry, only the few in control of the means of production get to realize their "American dream," while the marginalized are systematically denied access to the riches they produce.

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