I

Rat

The question is whether such likening of the "other human" ends only in similitude or whether it authorizes, operationalizes, and becomes an ethics toward such labeled humans. In short, what are the material consequences of relegation from human being to vermin being (a pest or nuisance that must be eliminated)? The term *pesticide* might be innovatively used to encompass not only the substances used to kill pests but also the theory and practice of killing them. . . . Vermin (the nonhuman) are not only pests to be controlled but also actors that coproduce and impact their would-be controllers. . . . Since Daniel Headrick's *Tools of Empire* and Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism,* studies that follow the itineraries of Europeans and "things European"—technology, science, microbes, and so on—explain what Europeans did but not what these vermin beings "did back."

—Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Vermin Beings: On Pestiferous Animals and Human Game"

I was on my way to a life of bagging tiny mountains,
selling poetry on the corners of North Philly,
a pest to mothers & Christians.
Hearing it too the cop behind me shoved me
aside for he was an entomologist
in a former lifetime & knew the many

song structures of cicadas, bush crickets &
fruit flies. He knew the complex courtship
of bark beetles, how the male excavates
a nuptial chamber & buries himself,
his back end sticking out till a female sang
a lyric of such intensity he squirmed like a Quaker
& gave himself over to the quiet history
of trees & ontology. All this he said while
patting me down, slapping first my ribs, then
sliding his palms along the sad, dark shell
of my body

—Major Jackson, "Pest"

Another federal lawsuit filed in 2003 by the Housing Rights Center and 19 tenants accused [former Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald] Sterling of once stating his preference not to rent to Latinos because "Hispanics smoke, drink and just hang around the building." The lawsuit also accused him of saying "black tenants smell and attract vermin."

—"Clippers Owner Is No Stranger to Race-Related Lawsuits," *Los Angeles Times*

Though Richard Wright's singular focus on the sustained threat of violent death that permeates black presence in the public sphere—as well as what such an ongoing imposition makes of black interior life and the possibility of black sociality—is undertheorized within contemporary literary theory, what has received even less scholarly attention are the ways in which Wright's commitment to thinking about black death is mediated through the appearance and activity of animals, most frequently and most germane to this study, the figure of the pest.[1] In the interest of precision, some clarification of terms is in order:

> The Oxford English Dictionary defines a pest as: "Any thing or person that is noxious, destructive or troublesome." A variety of other definitions exist in the biological literature, as for example: "a living organism which causes damage or illness to Man or his possessions or is otherwise in some sense, 'unwanted,'" . . . but most biological definitions include some consideration of the economic significance of the damage caused. Thus "A pest is an organism which harms Man or his property or is likely to do so. The harm must be significant, the damage of economic importance." . . . This last distinction is I feel an important one: much time and effort has been devoted in the past to the control of animal populations whose activities, while doubtless of considerable nuisance value were perhaps, if the situation were viewed more objectively, of no real economic significance. In such situations costs of control quite frequently exceed the real costs of any damage caused.[2]

This selection from R. J. Putnam's 1934 text *Mammals as Pests* is instructive for my own study in its engagement with the many resonances of the term "pest," especially as they pertain to questions of value. As Putnam makes clear, part of what qualifies a pest as such is that it by definition carries along with its body the perceived threat of economic loss or damage. It is this very characteristic that makes the pest a source of its danger and its life altogether disposable, that is, the animal's destructive orientation toward civil society and the structures, material and otherwise, that keep it intact. There is a fundamental conundrum built into this relationship, however, one that Putnam wastes little time in pointing out: more often than not, the very processes deployed in service of terminating pest animals come at a higher financial cost than the

initial damage incurred or the overall damage projected. Put differently, the central problem that the pest poses is undoubtedly *economic;* it just has little to do with money. For Putnam, the wages of pestiferous life are the toll that pests take on the psychic economy of a given space, the cost to an inhabitant of letting live what does not belong, what invades or remains though it is unwanted. By virtue of its very presence, the pest puts immense pressure on the integrity of wherever it chooses to take up room, slowly sapping the sense of propriety or private ownership that a given owner might lay claim to. Such an interruption, through the screen door, cabinet, or kitchen sink, is also always already an irruption into the logic of private property, an untenable counter to anthropocentric conceptions of human domination and domesticity.

Pests destroy the myth of private property from the inside out, though it is not solely for this reason that they are so often made into objects of state violence and/or hailed as a threat to public health. Such reasoning often comes back instead to the threat that pests pose to the possibility of a self-contained human subjectivity, one that thrives on a certain distance from contact or contamination. A home without pests is a home in which one can ostensibly live without threat of sickness or stolen food, the sorts of everyday risks that are all too familiar to those who are made to live without sufficient shelter. In this sense, pests not only defamiliarize the logic of private property but also wage war on traditional ideas of inside and outside. In "Feeling Animal: Pet-Making and Mastery in the *Slave's Friend*," Spencer D. C. Keralis writes,

> Pets largely do not provide a service in the household but rather fulfill aesthetic and emotional needs for their masters. (The benefit to the pet is arguable.) Cats and dogs that serve as mousers

> and ratters sometimes blur this distinction, but more often a household in which animals are kept for these purposes will also include house pets not used for labor. The services provided by mousers and ratters connect them in the minds of their nominal owners to the feral origin of their species, and the killing of vermin causes them to be perceived as unsanitary. They are excluded from the domestic sphere as "outside dogs" or "barn cats," though sporting dogs used for hunting can be exceptions to this rule.[3]

According to Keralis, what is most contagious about pest animals is not any microscopic biological agent but their very nature, that which marks them as outsiders. The pest transmogrifies all that it touches—even those animals charged solely with its elimination or curtailment—into a filthy thing that has no place within the domestic sphere. In this way, the pest serves as a marker of alterity, its presence in a given space a trustworthy indicator of what goes on therein, what class or kind of person calls the room between such filthy walls home. I would like to argue that it is this central concern with the contagious alterity of the pest that accounts for much of the violence deployed in its direction, the prevalent notion that, beyond the level of disease and discomfort, pests carry with them a disrepute that is largely incurable.

Thus, it is the central fiction of pesticide, the hunting and killing of pests solely as a practice of maintenance, cleanliness, or fiscal thrift, that is of special concern here, how it is that such violence can be waged under the auspices of austerity while coming at such great financial and ethical cost. If we understand pestiferous life as that which is fundamentally disposable, as so repugnant that it must be destroyed even when such erasure garners a

high price, then what happens when we expand the category to include human lives? What social and material conditions allow for such a gratuitous marring of the human person? What makes it so that the province of the human can be so easily split between those that are allowed to flourish and those whose lives are made legible only in contrast to something like public life or citizenship, those that must be wiped out for the comfort and care of those in power?

Richard Wright's larger corpus can be cast in one light as an extended meditation on such questions, and the figure of the pest serves as an especially effective tool in his argument for a reading of black social life as that which is always already marked by a certain orientation toward danger. Indeed, Wright's central metaphor for thinking black life after the Great Migration is no noble beast, neither the oxen nor the horse that we see in early black literature's forays into the plantation, but the figure par excellence of disposable life and thus also of black domestic life in the urban context: the rat. Though an abundance of pest animals populate Wright's work, it is the rat that animates the scenes in his poetry and fiction that most clearly articulate his relationship to black suffering as well as black persistence, its hunger and spirited refusal to be captured that best characterize the way he portrays the persons most central to the concerns of this study: Bigger Thomas and the anonymous speaker of his nature haiku.

It is my goal, then, through an extended reading of the opening scene of Wright's most famous novel, *Native Son,* to interrogate the way he imagines black life through the figure of the pest instead of against it, crafting characters that are consistently under duress but also always in flight, always fugitive from forces seen and unseen that depend on their subjugation for life. For Wright,

black persistence is not a site of celebration so much as an occasion for melancholy, a reminder that the world that he and his kin strain against is as tireless as it is resourceful. Working from such a vantage point, he provides his readers with characters that both encounter pest animals and live into a kind of pestiferous life themselves that is full of unfettered possibility. In Wright's hands, the pest is not only that which is stalked by death but that which evades it, that which destabilizes life and death altogether, giving us something in its place akin to fugitive life, black life on the lam.

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In an effort to better understand the opening scene of *Native Son* within the broader scope of its historical and material context, as well as to more imaginatively examine the ways in which Wright's particular emphasis on the rat as a kind of pest animal par excellence travel throughout the African American literary canon—even into the contemporary moment—the following section of a poem by Tara Betts, "For Those Who Need a True Story" (here quoted at length), is invaluable:

> The landlord told Raymond's mother that twelve dollars
> would be deducted from the rent for every rat killed.
> She sends her son to the store for a loaf of Wonder Bread
> and five pounds of ground beef. Young Raymond
> returns with bread & meat that she tears & mixes inside
> a metal bowl. Mama seasons the meatloaf with rat poison
> pulled from the cabinet beneath the sink. Well done,
> meat sits steaming in the middle of the kitchen floor.
> Then the scratching scurries. The squeaking begins
> and screeches toward the bowl.

> Raymond describes the wave of rats like a tidal crash
> covering the bow, leaping over each other's bodies
> then the dropping, the stutter kicks.
>
> A chorus of rat screams ramble through Raymond's ears.
> Keening, furry bodies tense paws against churning guts
> as they hit cracked linoleum until an hour passes.
> Silence swept away the din in death's footsteps.
> The mother's voice quivers in her next request.
> *Raymond, help me count them.*[4]

What Betts's poem brings to the fore—and it is important to note here that Betts, like Wright, spent much of her adult life in Chicago and sets a scene for us that could easily be imagined as something akin to the South Side kitchenette that serves as this chapter's central focus—are alternative possibilities for thinking the relationship between blacks and pest animals in domestic space, one in which the symbolism of pestiferous life lies not in its likeness to black ontology but rather in the problem of its sheer abundance, an infestation of rats so severe that their very dying might be described as a "tidal crash" that lasts for so long that Raymond and his mother have to sit together, away from the chaos, "until an hour passes."

The prevalence of rats in the apartment that Raymond and his mother share is not a reflection of the worth that they place on their own lives—indeed, the very planning of this elaborate killing by Raymond's mother demonstrates a love and depth of care that should be central to any reading of this poem—but could be said to reflect the disposition of the landlord who makes the wager that serves as the poem's first line and guiding conflict. It is the lack of value that an antiblack world places on Raymond's and his mother's

lives that creates the conditions for this precarious living, these unwieldy experiments undertaken so that either of them might get through a night without being bitten. In the world that Betts constructs, rats are still representational in a sense, but in a very different way than they are for someone like Wright or any number of other black poets who have used the persona poem as a means of entering the body of the pest, taking up its struggle, and imagining their own experience as racialized subjects as akin to vermin being.[5] What we get here instead is a set of scenes that are no less radical or daring, a work in which Betts dares to lay out the kind of violence that such predatory forms of capitalism inflict on black families living at the edge of the civil. In "For Those Who Need a True Story," rats become the only way out of an otherwise impossible situation, a means through which Raymond and his mother might plot an escape from unlivable space:

> They waded through these small deaths with rubber gloves,
> listened to the hump of each dead rat as it rustled against
> the slackness of plastic bags.
> Raymond wanted to stop counting,
> but mama needed to save a dozen dollars
> wherever she could
> if they wanted to finally leave the rats behind.
>
> After the last rat was counted, Raymond handed
> The bag to the landlord as proof. *Here.*
>
> Enough rats to skip the rent for three months.
> Enough rats to avoid the fear of sweet sleeping
> breath leading to bitten lips.
> Healthy children wrapped in designer dictates

Cannot describe Raymond's fear of rabies,
The smell of poison rotting from the inside out,
the scratching inside the walls at night.

Those children
Should find soft lives
That drop pendulums in their dreams
And never tell another story
About the ghetto
Until they've had to count rats
With their hands.[6]

In grand fashion, the poem's final stanzas unveil the broader logic behind its central action: Raymond's mother had not planned on getting a discount on rent for the purposes of remaining in the apartment but with an eye toward leaving it altogether. Thus, what originally appeared to be a bargaining chip (the dead rats in exchange for cheaper rent so that the family might remain in the apartment long term) is revealed to be a first step toward flight, the dead rats serving as the only available means by which Raymond's mother might actualize a different life for her family. Betts's final gesture toward the ways in which stories like that of Raymond and his mother are put under erasure in favor of more palatable ideas about what it might mean to inhabit a "true story"—which, as presented here, is inextricable from the tropes of cultural authenticity produced in a marketplace that places great value on one's ability to effectively narrate black suffering—is a move that jars upon first read, both because of its deviation from the mode of the rest of the poem, and also in that it serves as a compelling moment of insight into how the author demands its content be approached.

For Betts, there is another kind of violence that runs alongside the everyday danger of Raymond's and his mother's lives, the ongoing appropriation of such experiences without any engagement with what the material consequences of such living might be. Betts's warning about a contemporary reading public's attraction to the violence of urban living spaces, especially when such an obsession requires no personal investment or material presence, is instructive. What Betts demands is risk, cost, an ethics of engagement that understands "the true story" as that which makes something new and altogether different of the person who experiences it, that which shapes those who live out its strands as forms of knowledge that they carry with them long after the moment recedes into the archive. The true story here is one that is necessarily bound up with the historical weight of the way poor black folks in Chicago have always lived, a history attended to with great care by thinkers such as Sylvia Washington, whose 2005 text *Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865–1954* articulates this last point with clarity and force:

> Despite the midcentury Civil Rights Movement and the Environmental Justice Movement, the majority of Chicago blacks still live in highly racially segregated communities that carry a disproportionate amount of environmental waste disposal facilities. . . . The perception and treatment of blacks under segregationist policies fits Mary Poovey's thesis of the construction of social bodies by those in power in order to isolate a segment of the larger society with the ultimate objectives of managing, manipulating, or controlling them. . . . African Americans living in Chicago throughout the migration period were highly visible and thought of as being a "diseased" segment by the larger social

> body and body politic. The aggressive actions by the larger white social body to keep them essentially spatially and environmentally quarantined would lead to violence in the form of race riots and bombings, and, eventually, to de facto segregation.[7]

Following Washington, one can read Betts's poem as in conversation with a much longer history of systemic exclusion and state control leveraged against poor black Chicagoans since the turn of the twentieth century. Read in such a context, Raymond and his mother's collective labor toward escaping their apartment becomes a story not only of individual survival and initiative but of resistance against specific forms of state-sponsored subjugation. The poem's central action doubles as an act of opposition that seeks to undermine the very system of relations that put them in that tenement in the first place, the same system that counts them as but so many expendable bodies. Their escape can thus be read as an act of insurgence, a pushing back against the psychic onslaught of a system of relations in which the lines between home and war are always already blurred, always marred beyond recognition by grime or fire. Over and against such overwhelming structural inequity, the characters that Betts creates nonetheless seek out a better home, regarding the figure of the pest not solely as a natural enemy or obstacle but as a means through which they might seek out a safer home.

Part of what makes Betts's poem so critical to the theoretical considerations that are most germane to this study is that much of my interest in the relationship between blacks and pests is rooted in moments when the figure of the black is *inextricably* linked to the pest animal, when blackness and vermin being are yoked together within a literary scene or the social field itself. These

occasions, when the dehumanizing powers of white supremacy and antiblackness operate with such force that black bodies are rendered altogether disposable and deserving of extermination, are plentiful within my archive, but they are not all that persists there. There are also stories like that of Raymond and his mother, whose relationship to pest animals could be called normative if not for the complicated nexus of relations within which their decision to kill and collect the rats in their apartment takes place. The violence they leverage against vermin is not rooted in the dominant logic described by Washington, but in an altogether different sort of conflict than has largely been explored within the realm of animal studies as a field of knowledge production and ongoing critique of human-animal relation.

❁

Unlike the primal scene in Betts's poem, the reader is allowed no distance from the carnage in the opening scene of Wright's masterwork. Our first encounter with the family of Bigger Thomas is one marked by jeering and blood:

> Bigger aimed and let the skillet fly with a heavy grunt. There was a shattering of wood as the box caved in. The woman screamed and hid her face in her hands. Bigger tiptoed forward and peered. "I got 'im," he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. "By God, I got 'im." He kicked the splintered box out of the way and the flat black body of the rat lay exposed, its two long yellow tusks showing distinctly. Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat's head, crushing it, cursing hysterically: "You sonofabitch!" The woman on the bed sank to her knees and buried her face in the quilts and sobbed. . . . "Bigger take 'im out" Vera begged. . . .

> Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister's fear.[8]

Though the scene opens with Bigger's killing of the rat, ostensibly in protection of his family members and/or as a means of making their shared domestic space more livable, by the passage's end Bigger's small-scale act of extermination is exposed for what it is: force exerted for his own delight and devoid of any underlying, altruistic motivation. Bigger's aim is to deploy suffering in as many directions as possible, torturing his younger sister with the rat's body as soon as it becomes available for such use.

Consider too the numerous micro-performances that attend Bigger's killing of the rat. The heavy grunt when the skillet first leaves his hands, the smile he bares once it becomes clear that his weapon of choice has served its purpose. From the beginning, that Bigger Thomas derives unmitigated joy from the domination of others, irrespective of age or species, is abundantly clear. What is less apparent is how Bigger imagines he would fair against a target of greater size or strength, one he might not be so quick to attack for fear of retribution or embarrassment. In this moment, Bigger is a character beyond our immediate empathic reach, one that rejoices in the exacerbated killing of a rat—going so far even to mutilate it further with a blunt object once it is already dead—and then taunts his sister with its deceased, bleeding body. To sit with the gruesome nature of this opening scene is to wrestle with many of the central questions of *Native Son* as a whole, questions of socialization and individual choice, a grappling at the level of the act of reading itself with what it means to spend 400 pages with a character capable of such violence and no discernible impetus other than the world we share, a world in which the argument that young

men like Bigger are nothing less than ubiquitous flows too easily off the tongues of writers and policy makers alike. Wright, fully aware of such psychic resonances, nonetheless develops a protagonist who lives into that world's worst fears, its most dangerous tropes, and in the process provides a glimpse into the depths of the antiblack public imagination.

In a similar vein, although the way that animality (specifically as it pertains to the inextricability of animality and violence) works thematically in this passage might appear readily obvious—that is, Bigger's literal killing of the rat as a symbolic gesture toward the disposability of animal life, as well as the poor conditions in which city-dwelling black families of his era were forced to live—I would like to draw attention to a number of other, subtler ways that the pest animal registers here not merely as an object of sentiment or identification for the reader, nor solely as an explanatory apparatus for the cruelty we will see from Bigger later in the novel, but indeed as a means through which Bigger himself comes to be animalized. This happens in two distinct ways, the first of which requires us to think of the moment of animalization as not simply an instance in which a human being is literally or figuratively transformed into the equivalent of an animal but also the process *by and through which such metamorphosis takes place.* Put differently, I am interested not only in moments when such a transformation is complete or successful but in the very mechanism of disaggregating human personhood itself, in how and why certain human persons come to have their personhood revoked and what such a theft, at the level of social standing and relation, ultimately makes of their life chances. This distinction is critical in the case of the Bigger Thomas, as the primary way in which he is animalized in *Native Son* is not through the figure of the pest, per se, but in re-

lation to it. It is indeed the *improper* nature of the relationship between Bigger and the rat of the opening scene that marks his ever-present distance from the human, relegating him to a different space altogether, that of "the savage," as Michael Lundblad argues:

> Between Darwin and Freud, . . . after the end of the "peculiar institution" of slavery in the United States, dominant discourses attempted to sidestep . . . evolutionary narrative, suggesting instead that white men could indeed be linked more closely with "the animal" than "the savage" in terms of both "animal instincts" and common animal ancestors. A related—but less explored—move to distinguish between "civilized" white men and "savage" black men was to focus specifically on the treatment of "real" animals. Rather than delighting in torture, the civilized man could supposedly be identified by the capacity for treating not just humans but also animals "humanely." This . . . discourse of human reform was born at the same moment that constructions of black men were also shifting, and, more specifically an explosion of lynchings was being justified by the myth of the black male rapist, which linked an assault on white womanhood with a savage delight in torture. Human reform actually became a new and flexible discourse for claiming superiority over various human "races," reinforcing the logic that only the more "civilized" group had evolved enough to treat other groups "humanely."[9]

Instead of serving as a kind of counter-representation, or straining against such assumptions about the workings and limitations of black men's affective imaginations, Wright forwards a figure that fits rather neatly into such a schema. Bigger does indeed "delight in torture," as he relishes both the killing of the rat itself and the sort of cruel teasing of his sister that its death makes possible. This

decision on Wright's behalf, to craft a character whose every action would either run counter to the palate of a respectable white readership or confirm its worst suspicions is one that is well documented both by scholars of Wright and by Wright himself. But beyond such surface correlations between Bigger's depiction and what Wright imagined a white reading audience's reaction to such a depiction might be, it is worth noting that distancing Bigger from this particular discourse around humaneness, at bottom, also does the work of destabilizing the discourse itself. By opening the novel with a scene of such intense violence, one that immediately alienates the reader from Bigger and momentarily interrupts the potential for empathy or a certain kind of mirroring, Wright entreats us to do away with such limited ways of distributing value or personhood, to instead approach the protagonist he has created on his own terms.

To read *Native Son* is to encounter the inner life of a character that muddles such modes of reading and relation and in doing so entreats the reader to ask what compels anyone to hold fast to such categories in the first instance. Taking into account Lundblad's historical treatment of the discourse of humaneness and its relationship to the treatment of animals, what becomes readily obvious is that such thinking is at its very core invested not only in numerous falsehoods about black interior life but also in what the treatment of animals signifies in regard to one's comportment in and toward the social world. In the scenario Lundblad lays out here, the very people marking the various distinctions between humane and inhumane persons are those who themselves benefit from material inequality and structural violence against black human beings. That such a way of thinking about animal treatment obscures the subjugation of black people is central to how we might imagine

what Wright's work makes possible for us in the present, a critique of those branches of contemporary animal ethics that bear an uncanny resemblance to what Lundblad gestures toward in the quoted passage, writings where antiblackness is put under complete erasure, removed from the chain of being altogether in favor of a social hierarchy in which white men are the sole actors.

In such a scheme, animals become either objects to be protected by white citizens from nonwhite savages or one of many means by which white male civility is established and held in place. Nothing in this process accounts for antiblack violence and what such acts might make of white male civility or how such a legacy of ongoing aggression might mar that position, making it sustainable only through specific forms of domination and destruction. Every animal in the scenario Lundblad invokes is either property or available to death at a human being's hands. This is what gives weight to the mercy of the humane individual, the notion that all life *is in a position to be spared,* indeed that being in relation to another entity and not enacting violence on it is to be noted as a mark of exceptional character.

Though such logic is predicated on a set of untenable claims, it is nonetheless at play, not as an object of mockery but as a dominant discourse to be contended with, in *Native Son*'s opening scene. Before readers can contend with the way Bigger approaches animal life or that of his own kin, they have to first consider the substandard living conditions that Bigger and his family live through each day. Setting the scenes in such order creates a very different image of the relationship between dehumanization and the treatment of animals than what is presented by the discourse of humaneness. The economic oppression of black women and children is our port of entry into *Native Son* and serves as the condition of

possibility for Bigger's initial act of violence. Before there is a dead black rat's body, there is a cramped kitchenette. Before there is the inhumane treatment of any animal, there is the inhumane set of circumstances that the characters set before us have been born into, an antiblack world that depends on a lack of empathy toward the black urban poor. In *12 Million Black Voices,* Wright argues,

> The kitchenette fills our black boys with longing and restlessness, urging them to run off from home, to join together with other restless black boys in gangs, that brutal form of city courage. The kitchenette piles up mountains of profits for the Bosses of the Buildings and makes them ever more determined to keep things the way they are. The kitchenette reaches out with fingers full of golden bribes to the officials of the city, persuading them to allow old firetraps to remain standing and occupied long after they should have been torn down. The kitchenette is the funnel through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on city pavements, at a profit.[10]

Only a year after the publication of *Native Son,* Wright uses *12 Million Black Voices* to paint a vivid picture of the spaces in which black families were forced to live, whole "buildings which [were] dangerous for human habitation."[11] Thus, it is the substance of Bigger's domestic life that serves as its own argument against reductive claims about what borders mark the proper relationship between human and animal. For Wright, the matter of Bigger's rage and desperation is a sociological problem at root, more a result of his daily living conditions than any natural inclination toward cruelty. Wright chooses to render Bigger in a way that defies the bestialization of black boys and men not by invoking a kind of exceptionality in order to counter it, but by defamiliarizing the well-

known tropes through which it functions. In the essay "Slouching toward Beastliness: Richard Wright's Anatomy of Thomas Dixon," Clare Eby writes,

> Wright interrogates the white fantasy about black "beasts" through a plot centering on a legal lynching in response to a presumed rape that in fact never occurred. Wright so closely examines Dixon's assumptions about black masculinity that *Native Son* needs to be seen as parodying the white supremacist vision. In anatomizing the "beast," Wright both follows and makes strategic revisions in the stereotype. Much as [Thomas] Dixon sought, by his own admission, to correct Stowe's influential representation of African-Americans, providing what he described as the "true story" of the South, . . . so did Wright seek to amend the consequential image of the black male "beast" and, with that, the portrait of the nation.[12]

Wright's primary investment is in a project of reclamation and revision, in sitting with the stereotype of the black male savage so that he might write life into it, imbuing it with a fullness that keeps readers from relinquishing their fear or setting it aside in the name of enjoyment. In sticking with an image so firmly ingrained into the public sphere, Wright forces his audience to wrestle with Bigger, the reader's own revulsion becoming a participant in the broader web of affect and influence that was of central concern to Wright when he crafted the text:

> Like Bigger himself, I felt a mental censor—product of the fears which a Negro feels from living in America—living in America—standing over me, draped in white, warning me not to write. This censor's warnings were translated into my own thought

> process thus: "What will white people think if I draw the picture of such a Negro boy? Will they not at once say: 'See didn't we tell you along that niggers are like that? Now, look, one of their own kind has come along and drawn the picture for us!'" I felt that if I drew the picture of Bigger truthfully, there would be many reactionary whites who would try to make of him something I did not intend. And yet, and this was what made it difficult, I knew that I could not write of Bigger convincingly if I did not depict him as he was: that is, resentful toward whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountable elated at times, and unable even, because of his own lack of inner organization which American oppression has fostered in him, to unite with members of his own race. . . . The more I thought of it the more I became convinced that if I did not write Bigger as I saw and felt him, if I did not try to make him a living personality and at the same time a symbol of all the larger things I felt and saw in him, I'd be reacting as Bigger himself reacted: that is, I'd be acting out of fear if I let what I thought whites would say constrict and paralyze me.[13]

Contra the sort of thinking that would seek to render Bigger as savage or subhuman, Wright argues for a more expansive interpretation of his central character, one that repudiates white gaze in favor of rendering black lives as those that are infinitely more intricate than any humane/inhumane binary. His description of Bigger's roots doubles as a refusal of a racialized pathology around violent action and perceived emotional instability. The onus here lies on the legalized forms of antiblackness that force black boys and men to live under unabating pressure, a pressure that Wright accounts for and emphasizes in his characterization of Bigger.

Wright revises the trope of the black male savage by giving us a character that lives into its most extreme claims while never releasing us from the confines of his personal war. This characterization of Bigger's emotional life as one that is not reducible to but is certainly influenced by his response to institutionalized racism and state surveillance is a staggering counterpunch to any argument in favor of Bigger's subpersonhood or irredeemable abjection.

Wright's unwillingness to play into a narrative of propriety or uplift exposes the myth of the savage for what it is, a way of reducing the lives of racial others who cannot bear the weight of fugitive possibility, of what happens when black authors opt out of writing explicitly against the grain of antiblack pathology and choose instead to revise it, to keep the painful tropes largely intact while remodeling their core elements. Bigger is more violent than he is kind, and that is precisely the point. He is in the world and of it. He is what the world has made him and exceedingly more. For Wright, there is no solace to be found in debating one's humanity. Instead, Wright embraces the pathological, allowing it to free him from the expectation of writing a brighter future. The bestialization of Bigger doubles as an argument for a more capacious black personhood, one that allows for something like evil or what evil makes possible.[14] The blackness that Richard Wright imagines has enough room for Bigger and whatever his opposite might be; it is the kind of empty that holds everything he needs.

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Of critical importance here are the ways in which Bigger is dehumanized not only through antiblack logics that would seek to construct him as inhumane or savage but also by environmental conditions that blur his relationship to the rat of the opening scene

altogether and ultimately render him symbolically not as the savage destroyer of animal life but as the very animal life in question, as the pest that the exterminating forces in the book seek to uncover and destroy. In the essay "Invented by Horror: The Gothic and African American Literary Ideology in *Native Son*," James Smethurst writes,

> Perhaps the most telling moment of *Native Son* is the book's opening. First, an alarm clock goes off. The alarm clock ostensibly is a reminder of linear time. But in fact the alarm clock is a symbol of cyclical time marking the beginning of a day, a journey that will be almost exactly like yesterday and tomorrow. Immediately after the bell goes off, we are introduced to themes of confinement and transgressive sexuality. This transgressive sexuality is present explicitly in the shame that Bigger and his family feel about having to dress and undress in such close quarters. . . . Then a black rat appears, both terrified and terrifying. In the first moment of doubling in the text, Bigger kills his rat double, who attacks Bigger in a fit of terror, hunger, and defiance. Bigger goes on to terrify his sister with the dead rat, enjoying her fear. Bigger's mother prophesies a tragic end for him. End of story. But not really. There will be more rats. The slum buildings of the ghetto produce an endless stream of hungry and fearful rats. Bigger and his mother foresee Bigger's ending even if they don't grasp why such an ending is inevitable. But there will be more Biggers.[15]

Smethurst's reading of Bigger's inextricability from the rat of the opening scene is interesting primarily for what it obscures. Though Smethurst rightly picks up on the blackness of the rat as an initial clue of its metonymic ties to Bigger—he does not draw out or ex-

pand on this point, but his choice to gesture toward the rat's color, that is, "then a black rat appears, both terrified and terrifying," is important—there is, traveling along this vector of color and feeling, this darkness and terror that inhabit the same, small body, a strange conflation of blackness and the supposed *bleakness* of black social life. Reading the alarm clock as a sign that little in Bigger's life ever changes, indeed that the black quotidian is so devoid of energy that neither Bigger nor his family members experience each day anew, runs contrary to the narrative trajectory of, and external dialogues between, the characters themselves.[16]

What we see instead is a text full of characters that daily strive to make their lives anew, though those efforts are met with resistance on all sides. To understand Bigger's relationship to the rat as one that is purely reflective of their shared fear and hunger, and to mark either of those states as purely negative, is to ignore the myriad possibilities that linking Bigger's emotional life with that of the rat opens up. Though the rat in this scene can certainly be read as terrified, there is just as much evidence in the passage for a reading of the rat as an insurgent, as a stranger in Bigger Thomas's home that refuses to leave or live out its days on the periphery of the kitchenette. Instead, the rat interrupts the flow of daily life for the family. Its behavior is certainly marked by defiance, which Smethurst admits, but it should also be noted that what Smethurst reads as defiance, or even terror, is also a product of the rat being in the world, irrespective of intention. It is the mere presence of the rat that produces terror for everyone else in the apartment. It is the fact of its living, and the supposed threat of sickness or pain that its living imposes, that produces the rat as an object of fear and hatred, a creature that can be killed with impunity. In the swift move toward such negative doubling—one made feasible,

we are left to imagine, by the utter abjection of black life in "the ghetto"—Smethurst fails to account for the generative possibilities of the zoomorphism he uncovers and thus misses out on what the figure of the rat produces, even in death, as Bigger's doppelganger.[17] If Smethurst is correct in his assertion that "there will be more rats, . . . there will be more Biggers," then the rat is no longer simply a site of trepidation, and longing, but rather immortality.[18]

For Smethurst, the rat is invulnerable. Though such a dynamic seems to depend on an interchangeability and fungibility of black lives that is altogether problematic—Smethurst's reading of Bigger's reproducibility is legibly bound up with an erasure of particularity or individual experience—such a reading nonetheless lends itself to a vision of an unkillable collective, a mass that rises up even and especially when one of its number is slain. Such tenacity, such hunger over and against the material conditions of a subjugation that doubles as the rats' condition of possibility, helps us to reimagine the interminable flow of rats in Smethurst's imagination as figures of resistance rather than solely of abjection or despair. Bigger's doubling renders him both killer and deceased, a move that produces a wide array of meanings that lead us much closer not only to the image of Bigger that Wright gestures toward in "How Bigger Was Born" but also to one that strains against such a pathological reading of both the world that produced Bigger and the one that currently produces what Smethurst would ostensibly read as Bigger's descendants, the "endless stream of hungry, fearful" black boys who dodge death as daily labor. Such totalizing pessimism is avoidable given a more generous reading of the text itself; what Smethurst interprets as apocalyptic prophecy from Bigger's mother could just as easily be seen as loving admonition:

> "Suppose you wake up some morning and find your sister dead? What would you think then?" she asked. "Suppose those rats cut our veins at night when we sleep? Naw! Nothing like that ever bothers you! All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!"
>
> "You done told me that a thousand times," he said, not looking round.
>
> "Well, I'm telling you agin! And mark my word, some of these days you going to set down and cry. Some of these days you going to wish you had made something out of yourself, instead of just a tramp. But it'll be too late then."[19]

Later on in the dialogue, Bigger's mother continues: "'You'll regret how you living some day,' she went on. 'If you don't stop running with that gang of yours and do right you'll end up where you never thought you would. You think I don't know what you boys is doing, but I do. And the gallows is at the end of the road you travelling, boy. Just remember that.' She turned and looked at Buddy. 'Throw that box outside. Buddy.'"[20] This is certainly prophecy, but not necessarily in the way that Smethurst appears to think. Though there is a kind of prophetic forth-telling here, a naming of a present and problematic truth, this need not be interpreted solely or at all as a straightforward, *foretelling* prophecy that condemns Bigger, without mercy or hesitation, to an actual death. Such cruelty would be out of sync with Wright's characterization of Bigger's mother to this point. This is a moment of intense worry and fear for her, a fear articulated through reference to the danger presented by the threat of rats but one that is

ultimately less about vermin as such and more about what makes their very presence, and the havoc they wreak on the family household, possible. For Bigger's mother, the rats are a reflection of Bigger's unwillingness to work, their boldness the product of Bigger's refusal to fulfill his role as eldest son, as a patriarchal figure of authority in the absence of a father whom Wright never sees fit to name. The extravagance of the gallows imagery that Bigger's mother employs is less about damning her son and more about her desire to save him, to set him right and see him live a fuller life, one detached from the deathly life he invests in, to his mother's mind, by spending time with his current cohort of friends. When Bigger tells his mother, "Stop prophesying about me," it is has little to do with his fear of a looming death that she has unique knowledge of and more to do with the weight of her disappointment, the pain that necessarily attends such hurtful words from a parent.[21]

This web of feeling is left unattended in Smethurst's analysis in favor of a one-to-one correlation between Bigger and the rats that populate his home, one that misses the richness of the exchanges in this portion of the text. The rat's grisly death is not merely a clue as to what comes later; it is a means through which the reader is more firmly grounded in the present and made aware of the individual relationships that have helped create the protagonist we will follow through the text. We are granted greater insight into Bigger's relationship to both Vera and his mother in this initial scene, and it is only through such insight that we can better understand any number of other ways that the figure of the rat is operating throughout the text as a whole. In *The Escape Motif in the American Novel: Mark Twain to Richard Wright,* Sam Bluefarb writes,

> The opening scene of the novel is set in an urban tenement—a setting that could hardly be more appropriate for an act of escape—as distinct from those bucolic and semibucolic landscapes where most of the escapes dealt with in this study have taken place. This is the scene where the rat—that repulsive symbol of daily (and nightly!) life in the black ghetto—appears. The rat itself almost arouses our *sympathy,* as Bigger, who attempts to trap and kill him, will later arouse a similar compassion. However, the rat, as despicable as he is, is still a living thing. As such, if he merits revulsion, he also merits compassion; for not unexpectedly, both Bigger and the rat are (in the naturalistic mode) "victims of circumstance," inheritors of a "world they never made," blind creatures, threshing against an inscrutable force that would destroy them both, a world they would happily escape from given the opportunity. Of course, the rat of Book I will become Bigger himself. For like that rat, he too is trapped, in the first and in the last instance. Trapped as he is, however, he will try to escape his predetermined fate; and like the rat, he too will be destroyed by a frightened, uncomprehending (white) world.[22]

As is the case with Smethurst, Bluefarb's reading of the rat as Bigger's double fails to extend beyond the realm of the apocalyptic—in this case extending, explicitly, into the realm of the sympathetic—and in the process ignores a host of other possibilities made available by the novel's opening passage as it relates to the sort of symbolic work that the relationship between Bigger and the rat takes on. Bluefarb's analysis leaves our protagonist with too little wiggle room, spatially or otherwise, and opts instead for a rendering of Bigger's life as one fundamentally devoid of a certain dignity or freedom. According to this logic, Bigger is

like the rat primarily in that his life is a cipher. As deployed here, the term "trapped" seems to connote the same kind of hopelessness that is all too common as far as contemporary interpretations of Bigger's inner life are concerned. Such a move often relies on a depiction of black social life broadly construed that evacuates all potential for flourishing due to material conditions, a logic by which the "ghetto" that both Smethurst and Bluefarb invoke comes to serve as a zone of no return, a space in which nothing grows or grieves. To think of Bigger and the rat as akin to each other in the sense that Bluefarb does, that is, as powerless victims held under the weight of an invisible sovereign, is to animalize Bigger in a way that forgoes other, more interesting approaches to the text. Neither Bigger nor the rat is a "blind, threshing" creature in the way that Bluefarb lays out here.[23] Lest we forget, the opening scene is not one of total domination or swift defeat but an extensive back-and-forth between Bigger and the invasive pest, a conflict in which Bigger eventually emerges victorious. Bigger is actually set on the defensive at the very beginning, when he is forced to contend with the rat's firm grip on his pant leg, the moment itself a reflection of its refusal to remain hidden or die in the shadows of the too-small room. The initial conflict between the rat and Bigger is an occasion that destabilizes Bluefarb's refusal to acknowledge Bigger's own refusal to be caged or killed for the majority of the novel:

> After Bigger takes the plunge into violence, Chicago's South Side becomes for him a labyrinth—Wright's word—from which there is no egress. Almost before he makes his first bid for freedom, he knows, more instinctively than rationally, that there is no true or lasting escape for him. Like the rat in the book's first pages, Bigger is trapped—except that he is no rat but a human being

> caught in the grip of circumstances in a world he might have shared were life ordered in some other, more equitable way. . . . "He could not leave Chicago; all roads were blocked, and all trains, buses and autos were being stopped and searched. He was trapped. He would have to get out of this building. But where would he go?" Trapped. There is an irony here, since even the more familiar and innocuous amusement park labyrinth (or maze) has a way out, as well as a way in, assuming that one does not panic and disorient himself in the process of finding it. In Bigger's instance, the "escape" itself finally ends by becoming Bigger's greatest trap. Indeed—and it is doubtful how consciously aware Bigger is of this—if he would escape from the labyrinth of the city and society, he must first escape from the labyrinth of his own mind.[24]

Bluefarb's repeated emphasis on Bigger's lack of rationality and overreliance on instinct works to redouble the protagonist's animalization in a way that leaves him, rather fittingly, no way out. Not only is Bigger hemmed in on all sides, but he also, following this line of argument, lacks the reasoning capacity needed to fight back in any way that might make a dent. Both Bigger and the rat are largely hollow vessels in this sense, pure rage and hunger along a given vector. Such a misreading of Bigger's robust interior life, the contours of which the reader is made privy to at various points in the novel via the voice of an omniscient narrator, is baffling.

Though the acts of violence that Bigger commits throughout the novel certainly beg a number of questions about his empathy or willingness to exercise mercy in a given scenario, that Bigger remains a singularly thoughtful character throughout the text is difficult to deny. From his initial scheme to hide and eventually

dispose of Mary Dalton's body to the later decisions that help him evade capture by police for the majority of the novel—to say nothing of his daily ruminations on his own place within the social field—the insight that Wright's narrator provides into Bigger's everyday thoughts are more than enough to challenge a reading of Bigger as an irrational actor. To obscure his intellectual labor in the service of a version of Bigger that marks all of his escape acts as futile products of instinct, and his very being as rooted in separation from the social world, does an injustice to a character that is plotting his next escape at every turn, if not through a new job or running from the police, then through dreams of another kind of flight altogether.[25] Such a reading also elides the rat's rich history in the US cultural imaginary as infinitely more than just a figure under duress, more than that which is always already condemned to a life of unending want. As Jonathan Burt's book-length ode to the animal in question, the aptly titled *Rat,* elucidates, the rat has historically been a site not only of lack but of seemingly infinite transgressive potential:

> Because the rat is an object of defilement and because notions of defilement and dirt are very much bound up with key symbolic boundaries of clean and unclean crucial to a general sense of order, then the rat logically should take its place on the far side of a border separating it from clean or the good. But, the symbolic order as much as the physical order is frail and can be easily threatened, especially around dangerous ideas that are so often associated with the horror of the rat: unbounded sexual reproduction, a limitless appetite, and dirt. Cultural attitudes to the rat reveal that it is a pollutant with the ability to move between bodily and symbolic boundaries with an overall trajectory that

> seems to make it an especially threatening phenomenon as much in the realm of language and thought as in the granary or the food store. Like other dangerous objects, the rat constantly pushes at the edges of the borders set to contain it. Just to make matters worse, it also embodies a certain ambivalence. The rat is difficult to encode as a straightforwardly loathsome object partly because a refrain common in much writing on rats is that these creatures also inspire a sneaking, if sometimes sullen, admiration. The lascivious, greedy and cannibalistic rat, a stalwart harbourer of a good swatch of the Seven Deadly Sins, is also extremely smart, adaptable and even, for some writers, beautiful. And despite the rat's residence in ditches or sewers, it manages to stay remarkably clean and "preserves itself from pollution."[26]

The rat, according to Burt, is a figure full of contradiction, a fleet-footed signifier unwilling to stay still long enough to be held down or hemmed in by the limits of human expectation. As presented here, the rat is an ideal example of the ways in which actual, living animals explode the reductive significations that are so frequently mapped onto their bodies and in the process force the critic to recalibrate classic approaches to thinking something like ratness in a contemporary context. The opening scene of *Native Son* is perhaps a fitting place to begin such theorization. Taking up Burt's rigorous, graceful account avails a reading of Bigger-as-rat that is not easily conflated with a reading of the rat as solely a marker of death or bare life.[27] Burt's gesture toward the rat's numerous other symbolic functions primarily focuses instead on human misconception, on a widespread social fear of the rat predicated on unwarranted worries about its reproductive capacity and biological predisposition toward filth. Burt effectively argues that this is an

archetype of the rat that is particularly difficult to shake: that of a creature that haunts every crevice and crack of the modern city, lying in wait to strike or strain the lack of resources in a given space. Yet such stereotypes also bleed into more interesting ways of thinking about the rat's movement not as an instinctual fleeing or penchant for theft but, to use Burt's terms, as a kind of adaptability. Put differently, in the animal kingdom, there are few escape artists on par with our rodent friends and fewer still that inspire such a wide array of responses from the dominant species.

The relationship between such effects / affects and a certain vision of blackness is much more complicated than what we see from Smethurst and Bluefarb. Instead of an affective economy in which blackness is solely a site of lack or nothingness, what we end up with instead is a vision of blackness—which is not only the blackness of the rat or the blackness of Bigger but also the blackness of the characters that populate the book and give it its full, unforgettable force—that, through the figure of the rat, is also linked to a persistence that is restorative. Bigger takes flight not out of what certain critics would have us think of as base instinct but for the love of freedom and the refutation of a social world in which he was trapped from the very beginning, marked since the day he was born. Bigger's adaptability fuels such flight and makes his prolonged evasion of arrest possible:

> He saw one of the men rise and flash a light. The circling beams lit the roof to a daylight brightness and he could see that one man held a gun. He would have to cross to other roofs before this man or others came upon him. They were suspicious and would comb every inch of space on top of these houses. On all fours, he scrambled to the next ledge and then turned and looked back; the

> man was still standing, throwing the spot of yellow about over the snow. Bigger grabbed the icy ledge, hoisted himself flat upon it, and slid over. He did not think now of how much strength was receded to climb and run; the fear of capture made him forget even the cold, forget even that he had no strength left. From somewhere in him, out of the depths of flesh and blood and bone, he called up the energy to run and dodge with but one impulse: he had to elude these men. He was crawling to the other ledge, over the snow, on his hands and knees, when he heard the men yell, "There he is!" The three words made him stop; he had been listening for them all night and when they came he seemed to feel the sky crashing soundlessly about hm. What was the use of running? Would it not be better to stop, stand up, and lift his hands high above his head in surrender? Hell, naw! He continued to crawl.[28]

One imagines that it is just this kind of kinesthetic brilliance under pressure that allows Bigger to survive the period before the book begins, the narrative we are not granted access to which constitutes a kind of blankness before the chaos. Bigger's "hell, naw" reads as a mantra here, the demurral of white civil society's control bodied forth in a moment of literal conflict with the state apparatus. In a moment when surrender would be the logical choice for many people, Bigger opts into a different set of protocols altogether, choosing instead to seek egress, though the world may be crashing all around him. This climactic scene of the book's second movement, "Flight"—part of a broader triptych that composes the text in its entirety: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate"—is one that characterizes this section of the text as a whole and also gives new life to the rat scene that opens "Fear," offering fresh insight into what

the slippage of Bigger Thomas and the black rat from the kitchenette might produce. Bigger's ability to process quickly in the midst of such sensory overload (the falling snow, the policemen shouting, the yellow lights dancing against the roof) reflects an adaptability that we see modeled elsewhere in the text, though not in such dramatic fashion. Here, we have Bigger "on all fours" crawling across the roof, fleeing from the force of the law, spinning the moment's fear into improvisatory genius.

Bigger is the rat in its most robust form here, its adeptness at escape and survival bodied forth in each dexterous maneuver, his hands against the ledge against the air. This is what so many readings of the opening scene (and thus also the later instances of pestiferous tenacity throughout the text) miss. It is a profound misunderstanding of both the nature of blackness and the nature of the history and biology of rats as a species that leads one to a deficit interpretation of our first encounter with Bigger and the kitchenette that gave birth to his ongoing refusal to be confined. Both Bigger and the rat are "dangerous objects," forms of insurgent life that refuse the limitations imposed from outside. To read Bigger's metaphorical ratness, which is irreducible to but nonetheless tied up with the rat's literal *and* figurative blackness—read: blackness as a site of denigration or availability to death—as pure lack is to ignore a body of zoological and historical data that unmakes such thinking, exposes it as unfounded myth in service of a history that never happened:

> The rat is, as some writers have phrased it, a twin of the human, and their mutual history is dark. In fact, the rat has been represented as the very debasement of evolution. If one devolves "downwards" from the human, one comes not to the ape or

> monkey but to the rat. . . . In 1923 H. P. Lovecraft wrote a horror story entitled "The Rats in the Walls." In Lovecraft's comments on it he dwells on the topics of nature and evolution, and discusses the thesis that there were two separate lines of racial development, in his terminology Caucasian and Negro. These derived from different types of ape but at root they shared a common ancestry of extreme bestiality. "Certain traits in many lower animals suggest, to my mind whose imagination is not dulled by scientific literalism, the beginnings of activities horrible to contemplate in evolved mankind." "The Rats in the Walls" is a story, among other things, of such a descent through layers of cultural and natural evolution to the most primeval, base, and horrific level of human activity. What we reach at the bottom of this descent, however, is not the basest of human simian ancestry, but the rat.[29]

What emerges from the midst of this shared relegation to theory's underground, far from the inimitable glow of reason? Such subterranean living produces something other than emptiness, nothing less than an unbounded plenitude set free from the gaze of those who dwell above ground. In the rooftop scene from "Flight," we encounter Bigger as a character of singular improvisatory talent, one straining against a system predicated on the notion that he, the humanoid pest in flight, creeps and crawls at the nadir of the social ladder, leeching resources from those above.

From the very beginning, we see Bigger fleeing, fleeing always because *that* is the central argument of the primal scene—not that Bigger and his family are beyond repair, or at all broken, but that survival is flight by another name. Bigger is not fleeing from the police alone but, as is the case in Burt's extensive study of the rat,

from an entire system of thought that would brand him as the unmaking of the human project, a dark mark on the very subjectivity he should seek to attain. Bigger too lives on the margins of what many critics imagine as a full, human life and as such has been taken up in the popular imagination as that rare protagonist that doubles as an ultimate other, an archetypal criminal mind onto which we might project our greatest fears and anxieties. Yet neither Wright nor Burt permits such a straightforward take on their subjects of interest. "Flight" instead becomes the tale of an unkillable outlaw on the run, a central figure that dodges death at each corner while headed nowhere in particular. This striving toward nowhere is also the expression of the desire for an elsewhere, a place far away from the extended reach of the law. This desire is bodied forth emphatically in the "hell, naw" of the aforementioned passage, in the crawling and leaping and running that stand in composite as the choreography of his ongoing escape, his refusal of the "there he is" uttered by the policemen on his tail.[30]

It is Bigger's transgression of the law that blackens him beyond what can be allowed to let live or linger, the violence he enacts against Mary Dalton that renders him the object of vermin control. Bigger's understanding of this shift in his position is his central motivation for fleeing from home, an escape that operates in most profound contradistinction to widely accepted readings of the text as one that is marked primarily by a certain orientation toward death and the ever-looming threat of its swift approach. Even outside of critics like Smethurst of Bluefarb, contemporary theorists too often ascribe an utter lack of possibility to the opening scene of *Native Son* that forecloses the reading practice that serves as the core of this study. Put differently, such texts offer readings that do

not necessarily account for the fugitivity that is immanent to these figures, even and especially when they are under extreme duress.

There is a persistence that these writers cannot deny, even as they obscure it within an entangling pathology that leaves little room for beauty or breath. The difficulty of moving away from such a reading is exemplified in Abdul R. JanMohamed's brilliant study *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death,* in which he deftly moves, within the space of mere pages, between a reading of the rat scene that traffics in much of the thanatocentric language that characterizes aforementioned earlier critics of Wright and what reads as a much more capacious interpretation of Bigger's relationship to the figure of the animal and what such a relation means for how we are to read the role of the pest in the text's opening scenes:

> The rich symbolism and ambiguity of the famous rat scene that opens the novel allow it to be interpreted in diverse ways. However, from the perspective of the dialectic of death that preoccupies Wright, the scene's primary function is to map the zone of bare life as one fundamental border that defines Bigger's subjectivity. . . . Here Wright emphasizes the disruption, by the rat, of the precarious, ritualized civility on which is predicated the humanity of the four people in the room. The four people (Bigger's two siblings and his mother) living in this one-room kitchenette in absolute poverty and lack of any privacy manage to maintain their human dignity via a ritual in which the boys dress first while the women turn their backs, and vice versa. By provoking panic and chaos, the rat's entrance disrupts the minimal human dignity afforded by this form of civility and

> threatens to banish entirely the routine ceremony that establishes their humanity. Bigger's subsequent crushing of the rat, its "actual-death," permits the humans to return to the ritual that defines their minimal humanity. Throughout the novel, Bigger repeatedly uses the term *blotting out* to characterize his desire to kill various human beings who are perceived as penetrating into his "bare life," the zone within which his social death permits him to "live."[31]

JanMohamed's emphasis on the precarious, unwieldy nature of Bigger's everyday life—even to the point that he places the word "live" in quotation marks at the very end of this particular passage—marks his reading of the novel's opening as one that necessarily decenters the potential, if not for resistance, then at least for the presence and persistence of everyday living, an ordinariness that is undoubtedly something other than social death or bare life but might be better described as a third space between utter despair and the various markers of wealth or wellness that would legibly distance Bigger's family from the kind of abjection that so many interlocutors of Wright have read into the text.[32] Yet just as quickly as JanMohamed presents the reader with what seems like more of the same—though it is worth mentioning that his work's invocation of Orlando Patterson provides a theoretical framework for thinking Bigger's life as death that is arguably more compelling than much of what precedes it—he pivots the reader away from a deficit reading and into a (re)vision of animality that leaves space for alternative, otherworldly possibility. JanMohamed writes, "Bigger's future is symbolized by the rat, which, in the face of its condemnation to death, resists the inevitable with tenacity and

defiance. By constructing these . . . horizons or borders of death, Wright prefigures Bigger's 'fate.' . . . The recognition (and the embracing) of death . . . eventually becomes the precondition of his freedom."[33] When imagined as a figure of defiance, as the embodiment of insurgent life over and against the systemic deployment of death that rarely relents and is ever shifting in its protocols and forms, the rat avails itself to the contemporary reader as a kind of trap door, a way outside the text's well-received logic of ubiquitous sorrow and decay. Wright's rat is familiar with the imminence of death, how large it looms. Nonetheless, in this interpretation of events, that the rat is eventually going to die *is altogether beside the point*. JanMohamed's gesture toward the rat's pluck, its foolish refusal, creates fertile ground for a consideration of what strains in and through and against the social death he names and so meticulously outlines, of how black folks survive even when they are outcast and outgunned and outlawed and outstripped, how they nonetheless go about living through the everyday.

Ultimately, the bridge that Wright builds, and that JanMohamed shores up, between Bigger's daily struggle and the world of the rat is not a gesture of dehumanization but rather fresh insight into the universal particularity of such blackness, an outsiderness that flourishes in the shadow of white civil society and its (anti)social field. Both Bigger and the rat are able to live outside the "epistemology of ignorance" that Charles Mills describes as an undercurrent of daily social life for white signatories of the Racial Contract.[34] These figures represent a disruptive social force that knows no outside order and needs none in order to function. In lieu of "the good life," both Wright's rat and his protagonist choose worlds that exist only inside the walls and under the

floorboards, the myriad lives made possible by the cover of darkness and dirt.[35]

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The 4,000 or so haiku that Richard Wright penned toward the end of his life articulate an account of his relationship to the figure of the pest, and animal life broadly construed, that is altogether different from what appears in much of his other work.[36] The 817 spare, difficult poems that constitute his final book, *Haiku: This Other World,* were, according to Wright's daughter Julia, who penned the text's introduction, in some ways the textual embodiment of Wright's own health troubles toward the end of his life. To her mind, the haiku served as "self-developed antidotes against illness."[37] Such an understanding of Wright's process, as well as the material conditions in which he produced his final work—that is, he wrote all of these poems while ailing from amoebic dysentery and living in Parisian exile—is productive for a contemporary return to what this work might mean when considered as part of a larger tradition of black writers articulating their relationship to the ever-looming threat of death—physical, psychic, social, civic, or otherwise—through the figure of the animal.

Although there are certainly any number of animal figures that populate Wright's haiku—dogs, crows, cats, and cows are repeat offenders—I want to concentrate here on what the rats are up to. Wright's haiku have received a fair amount of critical attention over the past ten years, but there has been little extensive focus on the specific doings of the animal figures in these poems, as most scholarship on this work has tended in the direction of reading his haiku as a form of nature writing in a broad sense, without much focus on the animals themselves or what such a relationship between a

black writer and animal life might mean as part of a larger trend in post-Emancipation-era black literatures.[38]

Thus, my primary aim here is to home in on several of Wright's haiku, in particular, numbers 74, 21, 114, and 795, as a means through which to finally set foot on heretofore-untraveled roads that Wright maps out for us, largely by refusing to temper the preoccupation with rats that can be found all throughout his corpus. We have already seen from Wright's placement of Bigger Thomas vis-à-vis the figure of the rat that Wright is hip to its potential as a symbol of escape. Here, we are granted access to a separate component of the rat's affective arsenal: its capacity to hide, to haunt. If we can agree with Wright's assessment of the work, his claim that "these poems are the result of [his] being in bed a great deal and it is likely that they are bad," then I wonder what sort of beauty might bloom from this badness or lack of vigor, what approach to rendering the rat spills forth from so much time spent lying still, dreaming of the other locales that the rat's size and swiftness make available, if only through the reach that metaphor provides.[39]

Haiku 21 is a notable example of Wright's deployment of rats as figures of haunting, in part because no rat actually appears within the body of the poem itself:

> On winter mornings
> The candle shows faint markings
> Of the teeth of rats.[40]

In this selection, the rat's presence, or perhaps even the presence of many rats, a legion of rats untold and unthought, is signaled by the very absence of any body whatsoever, by the trace the rat bodies leave behind. That these etchings are left in candle wax, an instrument that might be used to ward off pests with its heat and light,

is a testament to the resolve of these particular rats, their commitment to being seen. There is also a gesture here toward the insatiable hunger of pest animals in the city: these rats that were trying to eat a candle whole if not snuff out its glow. The rats in haiku 21 leave a calling card but never show their faces. They thieve in the night and clear out before day breaks their cover. The markings they leave function in part as a reflection of the condition and quality of the speaker's home. One assumes that a wealth of candles might imply the absence of electricity or heat. Early on, then, we have a sense of the class struggle that is built into these poems. These are not the haiku of a speaker enmeshed in nature, free from the trappings of domestic life. These are works directly engaged with the forms of animal life that the poor are forced to grapple with every day, the natural objects that refuse to remain in nature and dare to dwell where they are not wanted.

Haiku 74 clues us into yet another instance in which rats are deployed as such hidden, liminal figures. Unlike their kin in haiku 21, the rats in question here leave no physical evidence whatsoever of their nightly activities, only the phonic matter of their movement:

> The sound of a rat
> Scampering over cold tin
> Is heard in the bowels.[41]

The open-endedness of the poem's last line generates an impasse here. By stanza's end, the reader cannot be sure of where the rat is exactly. If the "bowels" that Wright refers to here are indeed the bowels of the speaker's home at the moment of writing, the apartment that appears in so many of the haiku in *This Other World*, then what are we to make of the doubleness of the term, the hunger it

gestures toward, the way it serves to anthropomorphize the apartment. With an approach that differs greatly from the one deployed in haiku 21, Wright produces a sense of trepidation in the reader not through the visually perceptible clue—droppings on the window sill or teeth marks on the candles or holes in a loaf of bread—but through the very sound of rats moving. The scampering rats of haiku 74 are fully present. They are with us in the moment of reading. They are close enough that we can hear their footsteps but far enough that the speaker can register a great distance between their body and his body, between the underground of the apartment's inner walls, its bowels, and its primary stage, the desk from which he writes. Notice too the distance of the passive voice, "the sound of a rat . . . is heard," which rings differently, of course, than *I hear the sound of rats*. While assigning the hearing of the rats' footsteps to a single figure might have given life to a reading of this poem as a reflection on a frightening, individual experience, what Wright's use of the passive voice allows for is an image of the apartment as overrun with the sound of claws, of countless rats scraping against the cold tin of what holds the very structure of the speaker's home in place. The sound of rats is heard by anyone in earshot of their collective movement, anyone forced to be still and suffer their distant music. A similar theme permeates one of Wright's later haiku, number 114, which shares an opening line with number 74, though it pivots in a slightly different direction one line later:

> The sound of a rat
> Gnawing in the winter wall
> Of a rented room.[42]

The direct action of haiku 114 moves in stark contrast to that of the aforementioned haiku in which rats are central actors. Whereas

haiku 21 offers little more than teeth markings to indicate the rat's presence and haiku 74 eschews such visual evidence altogether, opting instead to linger in the fear generated by the sounds of countless tiny feet moving through the depths of the speaker's home, the rat that serves as the subject of haiku 114 gets right to the business of consumption. Whether the animal is gnawing on food from within the walls of the apartment or gnawing on the walls themselves is altogether unclear. What is undeniable is the voracious hunger of the rat that is made palpable in the second and third lines. Wright's choice of "gnawing" lends a sense of temporality to the description of the scene, setting up what feels like the inevitable breakthrough of this rat and untold others beyond the border of the walls and into the room itself, a break that would eradicate any and all boundaries between speaker and object, between the proper occupant of the room and the interloper we know only by the noise of its desire. The rented room we are introduced to here has a similar feel to the setting of both haikus 21 and 74. These are spaces we know only by what is not supposed to be there, by the surplus noise and jagged etchings left behind by vermin that eat and move and destroy with relative impunity. A far cry from any form of haiku that might "express the poet's union with nature," what we find in these works from Wright are strong gestures toward the various kinds of conflict and fissure that emerge from sharing space with unexpected visitors that have no intention of leaving.[43] These are poems motivated by a generative *disunity,* an extended acknowledgment of the peculiar ecology of affects that pest animals produce. There is no indication that the speaker is especially fond of these rats or even that he carries a certain ambivalence regarding whether they remain or not. The predominant emotion undergirding these poems is a sense of de-

tached awe, a willingness to engage with the singular power that rats hold in such a cramped space. Wright paints a robust picture of what it might mean to participate in an ecosystem in which human dominance is completely destabilized by spatial restriction. There is little uncertainty as to which party feels most at ease in these poems. Wright is not the master of this domain. Such control belongs primarily to the rats that populate these poems and serve as their principal object of interest:

> However much we may seek to extrapolate the rat from its unnatural surroundings and view it as a "natural" creature with which the speaker in the haiku is somehow attuned, we cannot escape the image of the savage rat, trapped, wheeling, and attacking Bigger. Even if such an intertextual elision were possible, the two haiku contain a sense of menace: the first results from the disconcerting noise of claws on tin, and the second from the rat attempting to chew its way through the wall and into the speaker's apartment. The point of view of the haiku is also interesting. Rather than using a subjective "I" to personalize the experiences, Wright suggests that they are universal; anyone who is impoverished could have the same experience.[44]

This passage, taken from Richard Iadonisi's "'I Am Nobody': The Haiku of Richard Wright," is compelling largely because of its focus on the agency of the animal figures at play. Iadonisi's claim that there is a "sense of menace" to the rat's movements, as opposed to raw hunger or the desire for safety, indexes the sort of unbound possibility when it comes to animal behavior that Wright makes space for in these haiku and beyond.[45] It is Wright's ongoing commitment to such capacity that leads to my primary point of contention with Iadonisi's reading of what constitutes the intersection

between the rat that attacks Bigger in the beginning of *Native Son* and the rats in Wright's haiku. Where Iadonisi sees "menace" and "savage" animals bent on inflicting harm, I imagine that Wright left room for us to see creatures committed to their own survival, ones whose everyday comings and goings are sources of fear only for those who live outside their sensory world. Though both the scampering feet in haiku 74 and the "gnawing" teeth in haiku 114 can be envisioned as attempts to undermine or unmake the lived environment of the speaker, they could just as easily register as banal activity, misrecognized and aligned by an unwitting observer, a speaker who knows well enough to fear the pest but understands little to nothing about its interior life. It is only in the last of the haiku in *This Other World,* number 795, that we get a glimpse into such interiority, albeit in a way that fits rather neatly into the accusations of anthropomorphism that Wright's haiku have faced since their publication:[46]

> A tolling church bell:
> A rat rears in the moonlight
> And stares at the steeple.[47]

One of the final haiku in the collection, number 795, serves as a compelling counter not only to Iadonisi's menacing, "savage" rats but also to any number of other depictions of rats that are prevalent throughout *This Other World.* In stark contrast to the rat that is forced to hide or haunt, one that can only leave its trace but never move freely in the open without the fear of death, we have here a rat that takes the time to contemplate, one that, rather fittingly given what we know about the author, stands alone that it might think and do so uninterrupted. This final rat is illegible as a pest animal in any meaningful sense. We do not know whether it lives

outside or inside the apartment, whether it has stolen any food or takes up residence in the walls at night. All we are given is a set of physical gestures—its rearing and staring that are perhaps rooted in, but nonetheless exist in excess of, instinct or reflex. This is more than an animal reacting to the sound of potential danger. What Wright creates in this scene is a respite from the unrelenting danger of the domestic sphere, an open space in which the rat might dwell or imagine the world as if it were otherwise.