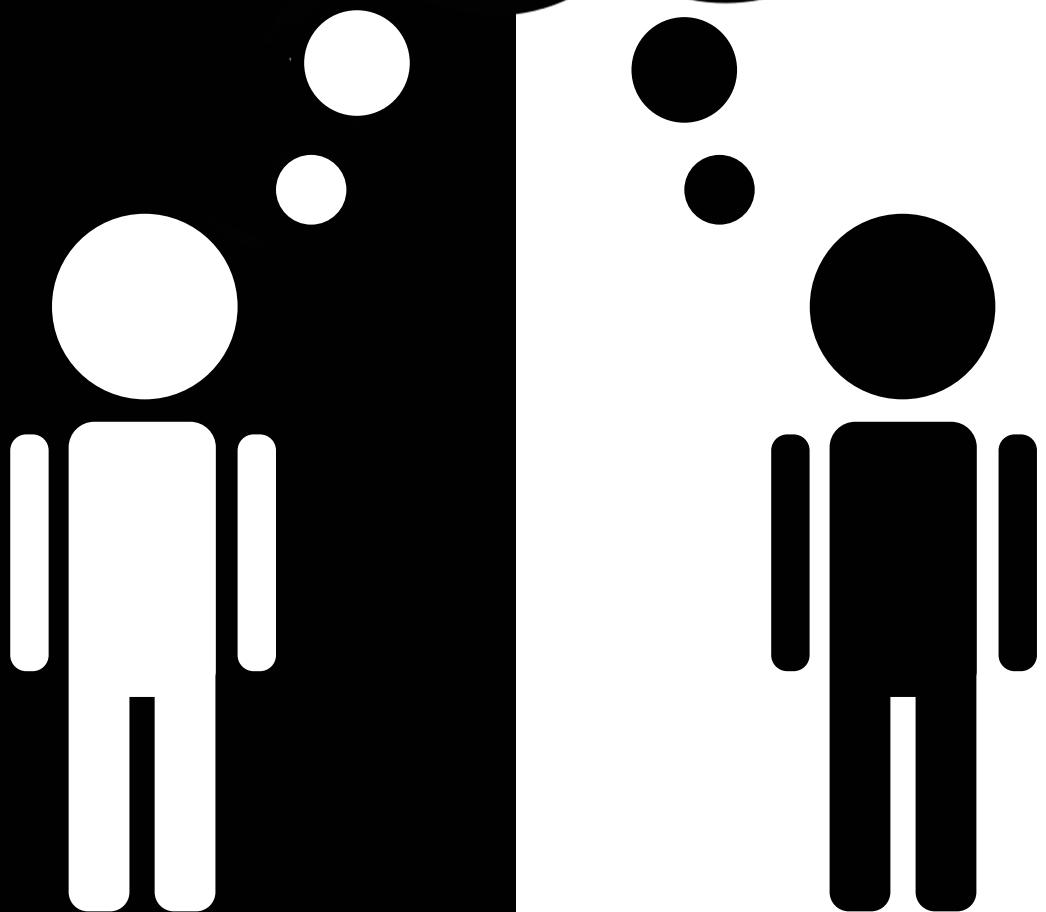


S C H O L A R

Communism,
Community,
and Native
Son



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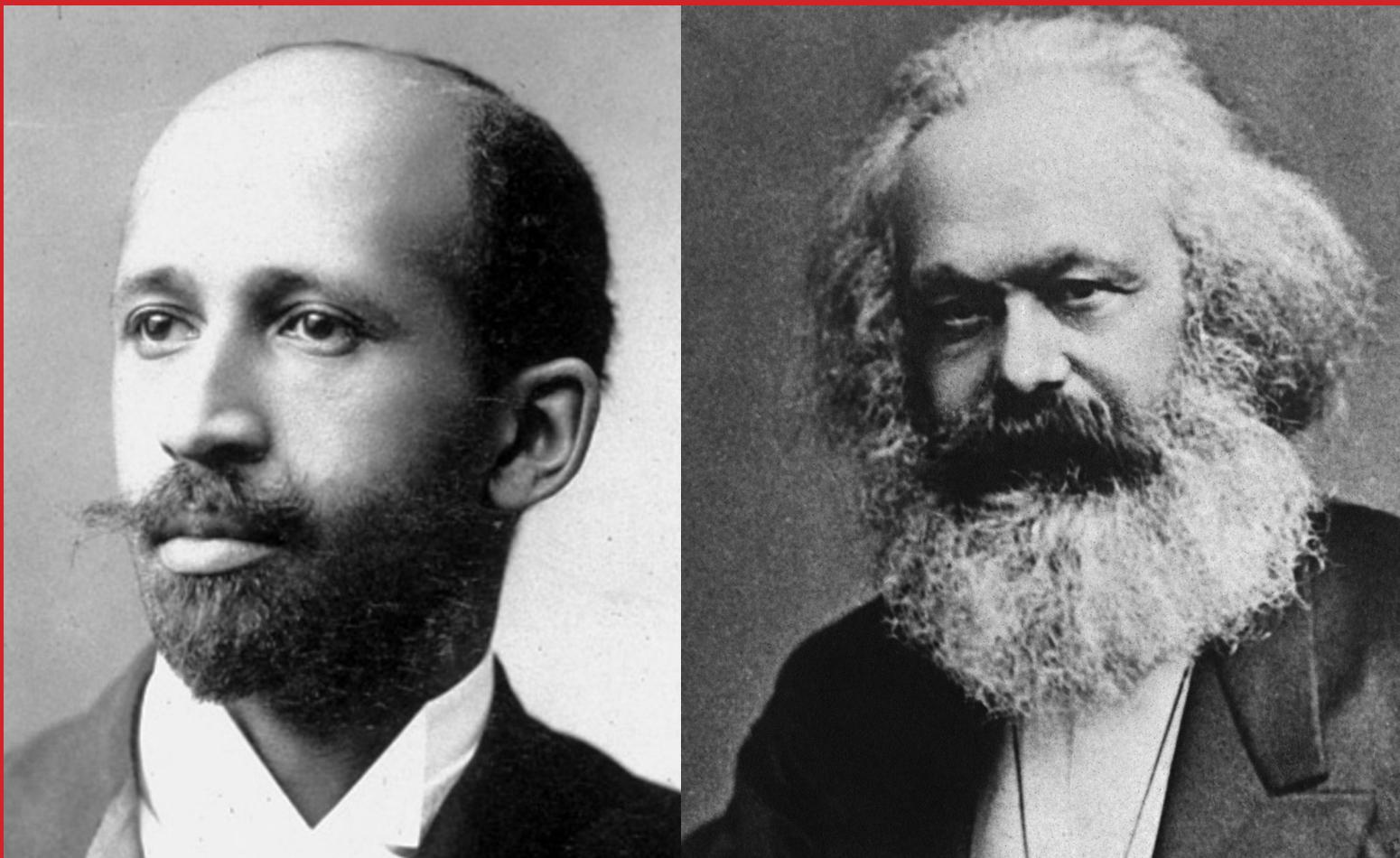
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Native Son and Communism in Black America

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W.E.B. Du Bois

Karl Marx



Richard Wright's Native Son primarily sheds light on the racial injustices in America, but also speaks a great deal about the anti-communist sentiment in this country. However, he does not give this element of his novel any real context. Critics of the novel, like George Grinnell, say that since Wright was beginning to depart from the communist party when he was writing the novel, he softened his support for them in Native Son.

While many black Americans, like W.E.B. Du Bois, and Hosea Hudson, saw socialistic and communistic ideals as a way to resist against a capitalist system rigged against them, much of white, middle-class America still rejected these philosophies. Richard Wright does not delve into the application of communism to the community enough in Native Son to have the book be a clear message of the ideology's potential value.

It should be interesting to many how America has developed a tradition of vehemently and completely rejecting communistic ideas and philosophies, as portrayed in Wright's depiction of the news media. Wright spells this out with scenes like when Britten, a private investigator hired by Mr. Dalton, first interviews Bigger on the disappearance of Mary. Britten makes the all-to-quick as-

sumption that Bigger was familiar with the Party. He then fires this statement at a clueless and confused Bigger: "You are a Communist you goddamn black sonofabitch..." (Wright 160-161). The media also perpetuates this by placing Bigger's image in the papers with the headline of "REDS TRIED TO SNARE HIM" showing that they took clear derogatory tones towards the party by using demeaning slurs like "Reds."(Wright 223-224).

It could be argued that Wright's portrait of White American Anti-Communism was justified. Especially when such views are held by even those at the highest echelons of power. President Truman (as shown above) was inaugurated to the office in 1949 and the speech that followed was filled with this kind of hateful sentiment that had been building over the previous decades. Truman

spends half of the oration echoing this portion of the nation with attacks on the ideology. Truman

blatantly points out that violence, war, and oppression are the ultimate beliefs and desires of Communists. Such thoughts can easily justify the consensus of white America that communism must not only be rejected as a whole but also rooted out in any community in America so that it may never take root and threaten the beau-

- America has developed a tradition of completely rejecting communistic philosophies

**“We can’t have a revolution without ‘em. They’ve got to be organized.
They’ve got spirit. They’ll give the party something it needs”**

- Richard Wright’s Character: Jan Erlone

tiful and perfect system of American Democracy.

Wright also mentions the presence of hatred towards the party within the American judicial and governmental institutions in “Book Three: Fate.” A real-world example of this level of prejudice can be found in the report of J.B. Matthews for the Georgia Commission on Education. In this vehement document we can see an agent of the government warn an already anxious white anti-communist populace that ‘The Communists’ have been at work for some thirty years in the field of agitation among Negroes:” (Matthews, 5). He also fills the report with list of African-American organizations and leaders that have been “penetrated” by the red menace (Matthews 9).

George C. Grinnell wrote an excellent article on Richard Wright’s imposition of communism in the text of Native Son, and how the books tone was affected by Wright’s developing opinion of the Communist Party. He suggests that Richard Wright was becoming increasingly disillusioned with Communism in the 1930’s and that by the time of the writing and publication of Native Son in the late 30’s and 1940, Wright’s separation from the Party led him to avoid making the American Communist plight the banner subject of the book (Grinnell 145-150). It would seem that Grinnell is correct in that Native Son devalues the communist question in opposition the black one. Wright primarily displayed his growing distaste for the party

with this devaluation. However, Wright may have also been annoyed to the point where he began to dig against the Party even if he still believed in socialistic politics.

While reading, one can easily sense Communist

Party characters like Jan and Max having opportunistic views towards the Black community. While Bigger spent the night out with Jan and Mary, Jan spent much of his conversation with Bigger trying to convince him of the value that communism could have to him and his community. However, he reveals some of his truer intentions with the line “We can’t have a revolution without ‘em. They’ve got to be organized. They’ve got spirit. They’ll give the party something it needs” (Wright 77). This would reinforce the idea of anti-Communists, like J.B. Matthews, that the party was targeting the black community as a means to grow in strength. It could also be argued that Max’s plea near the end of the novel was not so much used for the defense of Bigger Thomas, but used to project his communistic ideals for America on a massive stage in the public eye (Wright 372-405).

While Wright drifted away from Communism in his life, there are other black social leaders who drifted towards it over the course of theirs. Bernard W. Bell write an article on W.E.B. Du Bois, a hugely popular leader of the early black freedom struggle, helped found both the Black Niagara Movement and the NAACP (115). As the decades and World Wars passed Du Bois increasingly lost faith in American Democracy (Bell 115). In his book Color and Democracy, he even called democracy a legitimate problem for races seeking equality. Du Bois preached that as long as there was a slave or any citizen that is denied access to governmental participation, America will have failed in its mission of freedom (Bell 117). Du Bois searched America for a democracy that upheld socio-economic equality. Failing in his quest, he trekked to China for the same purpose and found that an equal democracy did not exist anywhere he looked. This lead Du Bois to gravitate towards Marxism and anti-capitalistic ideas as the only real solution for the black community, He eventually joined the U.S. Communist party in 1936 (Bell 120).

Nell Irvin Painter compiled the narrative of Hosea Hudson, a black communist in Birmingham, Alabama. Hudson spoke on his experiences demonstrating in such a hostile environment to-



Symbol for the organization:

NAACP founded by DuBois.

wards his ideology at the courthouse in Birmingham in 1932. The white Party members were the only ones allowed to get up and speak on unemployment issues, as they would only be arrested. If Hosea or other black members were to speak they would be beaten and even killed by the police (Painter 127). His testimony clearly illustrates the systematic oppression of Communists that permeated government institutions, and how it was amplified by the racial prejudices already in place. It seems contradictory that Wright drifted away right when such momentum seemed to be building against white-dominated capitalism in America.

Outside of America, the titans of Communistic thought developed their own reasoning on the question of race and their ideology. Wilson Record crafts a great article on the development on the racial positions of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Joseph Stalin. In the 19th century, Marx pressed the idea that the proletariat masses can never rise up against the bourgeoisie as long as so many of them are held in chains (Record 306). Post-Russian Revolution, Lenin emphasized that all peoples of the earth must have the right self-determination ad be able to distance themselves from the capitalistic system that oppresses them (Record 315). Stalin, fittingly, takes a more forceful approach. He insinuates that the bourgeoisie is purposefully perpetuating racial prejudice and using capitalism to benefit themselves at the expense of the black community.

While Richard Wright seemed to drift away from the growing Marxist and anti-capitalist sentiment growing in the African-American community in the early 1900's, the White American consensus was a strong as ever. This separation of ideas continues to present day and one can only hope of a time when Americans can come together to find a system that can benefit all citizens equally and bring an end to the racial and ideological prejudices and divisions that continue to plague the nation.



Vladimir Lenin, curator of modern Communism. He promoted ideas of self determination of the black community.

Violence: The Devil of Vices

By Hareesh Gali





The rape, murder and threats that embody the violence in Richard Wright's Native Son has been criticized as brutish and is said to overshadow the effects of racism by many of Wright's critics but Wright used this violence to send a message. Richard Wright's message was that he discouraged the black community from using excessive violence, such as mugging and murder, and educated the reader on why violence was so attractive to the black community in his book Native Son. Wright felt that these actions would perpetuate the stereotype that black people were violent criminals and result in intensified racism. Although many people have attempted to interpret Wright's book none have taken this view because many believe that it is a flaw in the book that ignores the deeper effects of racism or is meant to embody revolutionary thoughts. Bigger is our main character and is a young black man who is sick of his community and his family and does not want to face his situation. He holds a strong hatred for the white community because of their oppression that causes him to live in a terrible apartment and prevents him from achieving his dream of becoming a pilot. Bigger represents the negative emo-

tions that many black people felt at the time due to racism and channeled these negative emotions into his misdeeds such as mugging and murder.

Although Wright portrayed Bigger as a criminal representing the feelings of part of the black community he tries to emphasize that this part of the black community was a very small minority that had a very big impact on the way people viewed the black community. Bigger himself was quite distant from his community which can be seen in his interactions with Gus who blamed Bigger's temper and brashness for all the trouble the gang has gotten into and in Bigger's disgust with his family. Bigger rejects religion and spirituality which was an important way with which the black community connected with one another. Matthews describes this when he says "Bigger's irritation with his mother singing spirituals provides an early instance of this attitude, but another moment portrays more clearly the extent of Bigger's alienation from black religious and spiritual traditions" (283 Matthews). Matthews describes why Bigger is so irritated with his mother's singing when he says "this spiritual is one slaves used not only to voice their hopes for freedom in the afterlife, but also to signal their

- Bigger's [greatest] desire is freedom, once he accepts his situation he also accepts the restrictions placed on him by the white community

plans to seize freedom in the here and now" (284 Matthews). Bigger views these songs as a form of "surrender" rather than a symbol of hope and unity which is what the rest of the black community treat it as. To Bigger this song means that he must accept the hopelessness of his situation which is his greatest fear. This

fear stems from Bigger's desire for freedom, once he accepts his situation he also accepts the restrictions placed on him by the white community.

The members of the black community during Native Son's time did not have the strength or the influence to combat the ever-present existence of racism and the effects of the Great Depression. Per Altman et. al, although racist groups were in decline racism itself did not decline, this was due to the tension caused by the fear of blacks 'stealing' jobs (Altman, Sund, & Fox). Thus, as Decoste put it, many black people either tried to blot out this sense of helplessness and anger by trying to forget about it or using other activities, such as crimes, to appease these feelings (131 Decoste). The reason these crimes seemed so appealing is because they not only appeased the feeling of anger but it was a large enough stimulus to forget about their despair temporarily. We can see this sort of mindset in Bigger, who tends to pick a fight whenever possible. Bigger is displeased with his life as he cannot pursue his dream of being a pilot because all black people are barred from attending aviation school.

When Bigger's "eyes [are] filled with adulation and respect" we see that he understands the power that each of these individuals hold. Subordinates of people like J.P Morgan were respectful because of their great wealth, influence and power. This is further proven when Gus casually says he wants to "sell twenty thousand shares of U.S Steel" at "any price" indicates that Gus and Bigger think that people like J.P Morgan casually discard their wealth on whim because they have the power, the freedom, to do so. This is the freedom that Bigger and, to a lesser extent, Gus seek. By emulating people like J.P Morgan they attempt to fabricate the freedom that they envision these people having.

Eventually he could not escape reality by

just playing white because his friends' acceptance of their situation prevented him from forgetting about reality. He needed a stimulus that could draw his complete attention and energy so he could blot out reality, thus he considered mugging the white man. Wright showed the desire that Bigger held when Wright said "They

had a feeling that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo...; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them; a challenge they yearned to make..." (23 Wright). By mugging him he could create a stimulus that was even more powerful than playing white thereby blotting out reality by getting rid of that feeling of helplessness. The idea of mugging

- this power was, essentially, created by the fear white people held towards Bigger's actions and this fear only confirms the image that the white community had of black's

Blum made Bigger feel like he truly had power as he was "challenging the white world's rule over them" and by doing so they would "violate the ultimate taboo". Despite the desire to break this taboo Bigger did not go through with his plan because fear overcame him. After Mary's death, however, Bigger slowly started to become conscious of his situation and yearned for a way to blot it out so he decided to break the "ultimate taboo" of not committing crimes against whites and extort money from the Daltons'. It is important to note that he extorted the Daltons' who owned the area he lived in meaning that, to him, this was a direct challenge to white rule. But once people found out he was the extorter he was branded as Mary's murderer even though the murder was an accident and he never raped her. These accusations led to Bigger's execution and provided racists a reason to further oppress the black community. This result is what Wright fears, and he shows that the violent actions of a single person like Bigger can have drastic consequences on the entire community.

The lack of power and inability to stand on equal ground with the white community left



Protest advocating equal rights for black people and to bring the end of white supremacy.

many blacks feeling helpless and full of despair. Most black people attempted to forget this feeling through different ways that were harmless to society, like drinking alcohol. But there are a small minority that turn to violence to blot out these feelings. As Matthews puts it “they want to murder, mug, and hurt people so that they can forget about those feelings temporarily” (282-283 Matthews). In the novel, Bigger said “I hurt folks ‘cause I felt I had to; that’s all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn’t give me no room” (355 Wright). Bigger hurt people because he “felt” he had to, that feeling is due to Bigger’s continued need for a stimulus to let him forget about the powerless situation he was in. When Bigger says “they wouldn’t give me no room” he is saying they would not give him any freedom to do what he wished because, as a black person, everything he did was restricted. By hurting these people Bigger felt that he would have more freedom because there are less people blocking his way as well as letting him forget about his powerlessness temporarily.. This short-sightedness provided escape temporarily but it also caused people to look at the black community in a more fearful perspective due to their violent acts resulting in the affirmation of the stereotype and the intensification of racism.

Bigger strongly desires the power that accompanies whiteness and wants to dissociate himself with the shame and helplessness of being black, as Matthews put it “Bigger does not want to be white so much as he envies the power and privileges that come with whiteness” (289 Matthews). When Bigger was extorting money from the Daltons he finally felt in control and felt as

though he finally acquired the power he was looking for. Bigger believes that he finally has control of his life because he has acquired the power to be called one but fails to realize that his power is temporary because he cannot openly do many things as he will still face backlash from the white community. Furthermore, this power was, essentially, created by the fear white people held towards Bigger’s actions and this fear only confirms the image that the white community had of blacks thus perpetuating the black criminal stereotype.

Although the racial tensions of the novel’s time, the 1930’s, are less prominent they are still very much present today. We see examples of this every day whether it be on the news or in front of us as we are moving about. Wright’s argument is just as valid today as we have seen growing racial tensions throughout the nation. The Baltimore and Ferguson riots are just two of the places where the black community embraced violence which resulted in nationwide fear of the black community. Many people still sympathize with the black community because they are still in an unfair situation where they are discriminated against even though we live in such an advanced age. Although we have progressed quite far in terms of resolving racial tensions there are still places, such as Ferguson, where racism is still very real. Despite this acting out of rage and nearly burning the town to the ground like what happened at the Ferguson riots will only instill fear in those who would otherwise sympathize with you. This was what Wright was trying to say, people will rally behind the black community if they have sympathy and are empathetic towards its situation but violence will quickly disperse this support because people fear that the black community will continue to commit crimes if they are not suppressed. Violence is certainly an answer but it is more of a band aid rather than concrete solution.

“Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery.

– Malcolm X



The Struggle of Communists in Native Son

By: Josh Goldenberg



“Necessity is blind until it becomes conscious. Freedom is the consciousness of necessity.”

- Karl Marx

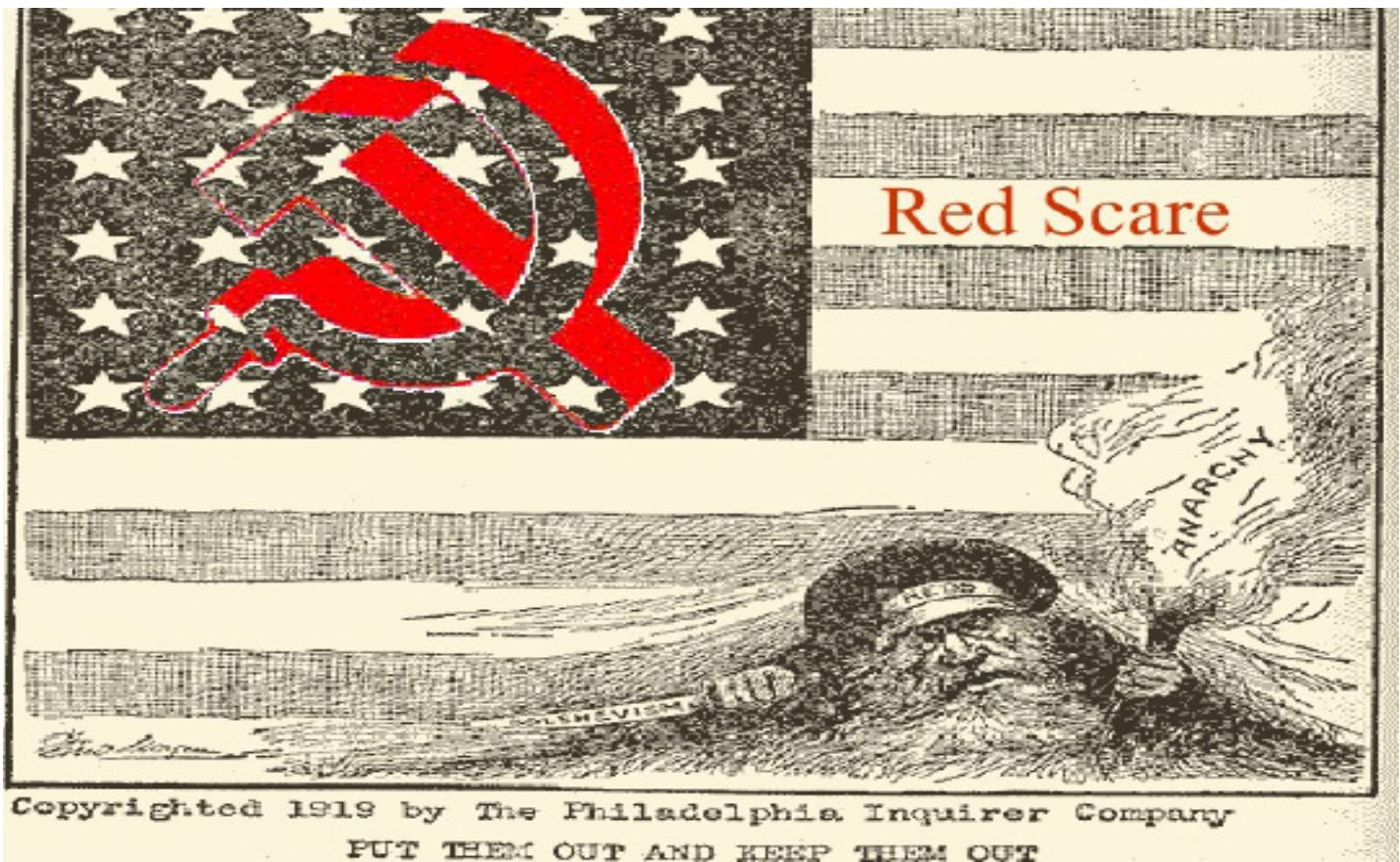
During the time period of the novel, Americans would do anything and everything to gather a general public hatred for communism. This includes connecting topics which were frowned upon, including homosexuality at the time, to communism in order to garner hate. Thomas Fahy wrote an essay about the social conformity around the 1930's. This social conformity had much to do with the Red Scare and the thought that communism was an evil. As a result of this people would do anything to frame communists as being bad people even if their arguments were illogical and forced. An example that would prove the point of the large sense of forced anti-communism would be the “implied link between communism and homosexuality [which] became increasingly explicit,” (Fahy 21). The fact that sexuality was tied in to political party to create a greater sense of abhorrence towards communism shows the lack of basis for their movement. There is no good argument that would prove homosexuality relates to communism in any sense, but the fact that people would use it to create hate towards communism is, in and of itself, an example of the extreme bias against communism. Examples of this bias can be found in the “Native Son”.

“Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand.” - Karl Marx

Americans during the 1940's had an extreme bias against Communists, they would do anything in their power to make life as hard as possible for them. When Jan is confronted with Bigger, Mr. Dalton and Britten after the murder, Bigger lays all the blame on Jan. This, of course, is not true as Bigger had committed the murder. Mr. Dalton still asks Bigger whether he's “telling [them] the truth about all this,” to which Britten responds “He's all right,”

Communism in Richard Wright's Native Son a topic that has not been given enough consideration due to the fear that it instills in people, especially Americans. In Native Son, Bigger blames the communist party for the crimes he has committed even though they are completely innocent. When analyzing the novel “Native Son” many scholars often talk about race and oppression, instead of communism. This may be due to the fact that the topic creates a sense of fear, more so than oppression or racism because of the danger that is brought to mind when thinking about communism, the thought of war. However, when it is talked about it is often done so with a negative connotation. They fail to address how African Americans and Communists are related, and they connect with each other on the basis of oppression. The point Wright is trying to make with the hatred for communism in the novel is he wants people to feel sympathy for the communists because of their disadvantage in American society with all the hate that comes their way.

Communism is frowned upon in America because of the fear that the word insinuates, which comes from a source of ignorance. The general bias displayed by Americans is created in large part due to their ignorance and following instead of thinking for themselves. If more thought was put into Americans actions they would be able to understand the oppression of communists is wrong just as racism is. These two types of oppressions are equal yet only one is viewed as worse than the other. Americans must be more open minded when it comes to accepting different types of people with different beliefs, specifically with communism.



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PUT THEM OUT AND KEEP THEM OUT

1920s Red Scare had put Communism on the map for US citizens.

(Wright 170). Britten has no reason to believe Bigger, but the fact is he wants to believe him. Britten wants Jan to be taken to jail more than Bigger because of Jan's political affiliation. Britten's blind faith in Bigger reinforces my claim that there was little basis to the movement of anticomunism because of the little proof he had of believing Bigger over Jan. One could argue that the bias is warranted since even though Bigger did commit the crime Mr. Dalton incoherently had more faith in him since he had known him for longer and had a better sense of who he was. Still, they had no reason to believe Bigger's claims over those of Jan's since there was no evidence other than their words.

The morning after committing the murder of Mary, Bigger arrives back at the Dalton house early in the morning. The first thing he sees was Peggy who "seemed to be peering hard into the furnace" (Wright 116). Peggy was standing right by the furnace that contained Mary's burning body while being completely oblivious no matter how "hard" she looked. By having Peggy stand over the furnace while Mary's burning body is

right inside of it symbolizes the ignorance of not just Peggy, but all Americans. This concept can be applied to any national struggle such as racism or communism. Wright is creating a general message that not only connects ignorance to communism, but it also connects the wrath of racism to that of anti-communism. Wright wants people to understand that African Americans and communists share the same struggles even though they might be much different. Americans during this time period viewed them in the same light, with a negative connotation.

Racism and anti-communism have a connection, which is both parties affected are oppressed just as much as the other. Frances Clark, in his thesis "Alienation and quest for identity in the works of Richard Wright" speaks on Wrights beliefs on racism and analyzes "Native Son" to figure them out. Clark says that "Wright sees the



two worlds of black and white as separate entities." (Clark 4). These "separate entities" symbolize not only whites and blacks but the same principles can be used for communists and anti-communists. In the novel racism and anti-communism are similar ideas in that they are created to oppress a population of people. African Americans are oppressed by racism just as communists are oppressed by anti-communism. Some people might argue that African Americans were oppressed in a much harsher way because of physical abuse. This of course is true, but in terms of mental damage they had a similar experience. During the 1940's communists feared for their safety just as much as African Americans were fearing for their safety. This strenuous mental abuse by society was what connected the two vastly different people.

Another way that racism and communism are connected in the novel is through Mary Dalton. In her essay, Sondra Guttman analyzes Wright's arguments on communism and how they relate to other issues. She argues that he thinks communism and racism are issues that are equal in nature because of how they affect the oppressed. Sondra believes that Bigger, Jack, and Jan- the two poor, young blacks and the white Communist-all desire Mary sexually because they desire the economic and social power for which she stands." (Guttman 173). Bigger and Jan, although very different, both have lust for Mary. By connecting the two men through Mary he connects their desire for power, which Bigger and Jan certainly show. Bigger shows this power after committing this lust for power after committing the murder of Mary, and Jan while attempting to lead the communist movement and force it into American Culture. Not only, though, does she use it to connect their desire for power, but he also connects their oppressions through Mary.

Communism has been seen in a biased manner in America ever since first the red scare. This is mainly due to the ignorance of the American people when it comes to communism, which was brought by fear. Wright, in his novel "Native Son" wanted people to see and sympathize not only with African Americans, but communists as well. There is a lack of reasonable basis to the anti-communist movement, American citizens are far too influenced by culture and need to be able to realize that anti-communism is a form of oppression similar to racism, in which a group of people

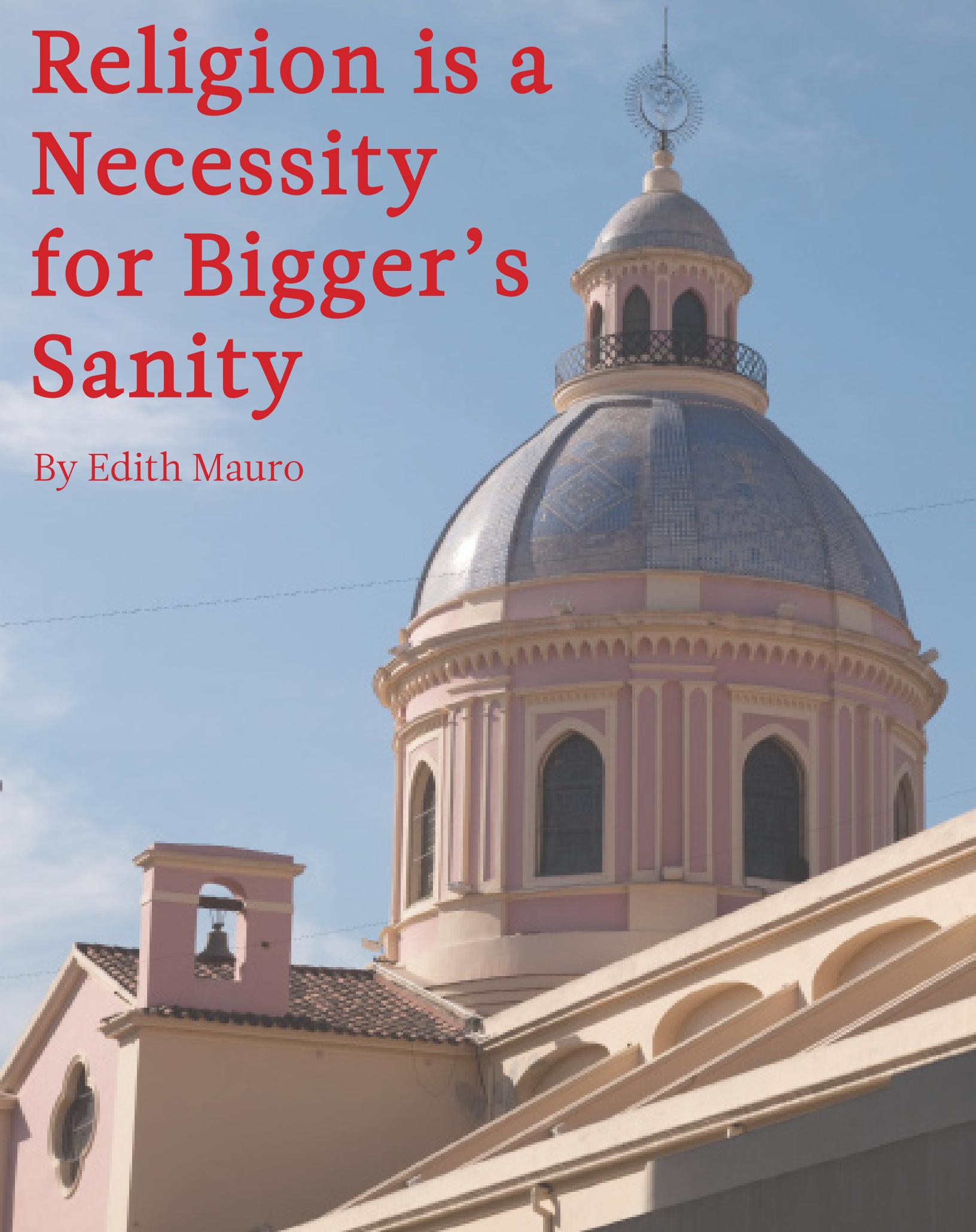
are looked down upon for irrational reasons. Communists just as African Americans have the rights that everyone else does and yet people still view communists as immoral individuals who want to bring evil onto the world for reasons that are unfit. Communism must be viewed in a different light if American democracy is to prevail and hold true.

- By connecting the two men through Mary he connects their desire for power...



Religion is a Necessity for Bigger's Sanity

By Edith Mauro





Bottling up anger and stress does a lot of harm on a person's mental and emotional state of mind. In Richard Wright's, Native Son, Bigger Thomas, the main character, performs a series of violent actions as a result of the pent up fear, frustration, and anxiety he feels because of the society he lives in. If Bigger has a safe haven to express himself, he might not have to resort to violence as being one of his outlets of aggression. He needs a community he could relate to; a community that he feels completely comfortable with and connected with the other members. Religion in the black community serves as a safe haven and unifier during the time when black people were viewed as secondary citizens. If Bigger had strong ties with the Church, or another religious community, it would have been easier to deal with the unfair time period.

-A person who is faced with this much oppression and, as a result, is living in fear should have at least one place they feel completely free from the harshness of reality.

Bigger's anxiety in society is debilitating to his own mental health. Doctor Suzanne J Smith, a Clinical Associate Instructor of Psychiatry School of Medicine in Case Western Reserve University explains how bottling up stress (like Bigger does) is not safe for the body and mind.

"In this state of heightened [stress] your body goes through a number of changes including your blood pressure rises, heart rate increases, muscles remain tense, digestive processes are disrupted, extremities become cool, among other changes" (Smith 1).

This means that not only is great anxiety hard on the mind, but on the physical body as well. The reader witnesses Bigger perform 'fight or flight' actions throughout the novel, that resulted in his demise. This includes the suffocating of Mary due to a mass amount of fear. He has no healthy way to release his pent up anxiety, and as a result, was in a constant state of being on-edge.

Bigger never seeks a proper place of psychological comfort in Native Son, instead he keeps

“...to understand the power of the black church it must first be understood that there is no disjunction between the black church and the black community.” -Eric Lincoln

most of his feelings to himself until he cannot anymore. A person who is faced with this much oppression and, as a result, is living in fear should have at least one place they feel completely free from the harshness of reality. This place devoid of fear is described as a ‘homeplace’ in words of Bell Hooks in her work, *Homeplace: A Site of Resistance*. Her definition of a home place states that it is a safe haven that separated harsh reality from the home. “Such a contrast, that feeling of arrival, of homecoming, this sweetness and the bitterness of that journey, that constant reminder of white power and control” (Hooks 42). This homeplace, Hooks expresses, was created by black women for the purpose of escape from a “white supremacist domination” (44). A homeplace is not just found in the home, it is specific for each person. For a lot of people, especially in the black community, their homeplace is a religious place of worship or community. If Bigger had strong ties in a religious community he would have had an easier time dealing with the hardships of reality. Unfortunately, his homeplace was nonexistent, so he was left to face humanity alone.

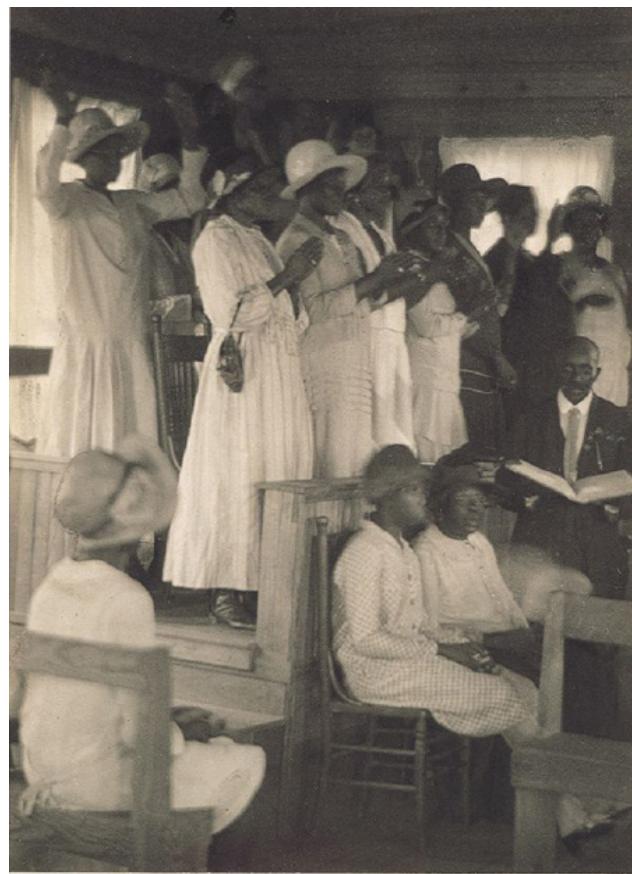
Hook’s definition of a homeplace can be compared to that of a religious community. A religious community is made up of a united group of people searching for outside meaning in their lives through the worship of God, specifically Christianity (as mentioned in *Native Son*). Religion, itself, acts as a unifier and is an important part of society in general. Dr. Bernard LaFayette, Jr. describes the church during the Civil Rights Movement closely to how Hooks describes the homeplace. He states:

...the church represented the freedom that the movement participants sought. It was a facility in the community beyond the control of the white power structure. It was a place where people could express themselves without reprisal. It was a place where people could speak the truth, where they could sing and even shout. (LaFayette 3)

This can be compared to homeplace because the

purpose of a homeplace is to provide a place of strength in a society where none is found for this particular group of people. That homeplace for Bigger should be the Church. The Church, like a homeplace is the center of resistance to the black community and is greatly valued toward the people’s overall unity against the white supreme.

The idea of how religion can strengthen people is very accurate especially within the black community. This group in particular has faced great injustice throughout history, and has looked to the arts and religion for ways of mental escape. For those reasons, religion has proved to be an important part of black culture and contributes to strengthening their spirit. The emphasis on



This photo is of the black community coming together to worship.

religion to the black people can be expressed in this quote by Eric Lincoln: “to understand the power of the black church it must first be understood that there is no disjunction between the black church and the black community” (96). Religion to this group of people was less about the worship (even though it was an important part) and more about the uniting of the community. They used religion as an outlet for the social injustices in society just like Bigger’s mother did in the novel,

Native Son. The idea that religion helps to release the frustrations of society further strengthens why Bigger needs religion in his life. Religion provides Bigger with a group of same minded people trying to distract themselves from the cruelty of society. He needs this community to make him feel that what he is feeling is normal. He needs this sense of peace to contradict the distress he feels almost every day. Whether they fully believe in God or religion, as Nada and Warms explains, religion can be used to counteract the negativity. It is a healthy way to revolt against the system. People gather together to strengthen their morals and to remind each other that even if they feel weak as a race, they can still stand tall as a united Christian body.

Religion provides Bigger with a group of same minded people trying to distract themselves from the cruelty of society.

Even though religion is beneficial not only for a person's sense of community, but also for their overall mental wellbeing, Bigger is still reluctant to join the Church. He views it as a negative aspect of culture. The most prominent religious character in Bigger's life is his mother, Mrs. Thomas. He thinks her distracting herself from reality through religion is a negative comfort. He compares being involved in religion to alcoholism. "He hated his mother for that way of hers which was like Bessie's. What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion" (Wright 240). Both religion and alcoholism were coping mechanisms for the two women Bigger references. He compares the two actions to emphasize how society is so bad that black people have to turn to ways of distraction to forget reality.

Bigger thinks that religion is used to help the poor and has no use for him right now. He thinks that it is only useful for those who have absolutely nothing else to live for. Poor people are what he focusses on, but he is thinking of all those with hopeless lives. He also associates religion with the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist hate group. At one point in the book, Bigger sees white Ku Klux Klan members burning their cross on a hill. The cross of the Ku Klux Klan reminds him of the religious cross he had around his neck that was given to him by the preacher. He notices that this religion does not represent hope and salvation, but a racist superpower white people

use to keep control and express their hatred toward the black race. His hatred toward the Ku Klux Klan was taken out on the cross around his neck. He actually ripped the cross off his neck and threw it as if the cross was burning his skin.

At some points in the novel, despite openly expressing his hatred for religion multiple times, he unintentionally expresses admiration for religion as well. All in all, Bigger was not afraid of the Church. In fact, he admired the Church and what it represents at some points in the novel. The cross the preacher gave him "had made him feel awe and wonder, not fear and panic. It had made him want to kneel and cry" (Wright 337). It gave him a sliver of hope during a dark period of his

life. This hopefulness, even if it did not show up often in the novel, revealed that Bigger wanted to turn to the church for means of positive escape.

If Bigger turned to religion to liberate himself of his pessimistic views of society in a healthy manner, he would not have so much pent up fear that he has an instinctual need to kill. Religion would give meaning in his life; he would have a purpose. He would not be forced to become a murderous black stereotype created by a white-supreme society if he expressed himself through religion. Bigger needs to recognize that bottling up everything hurt him and caused his extreme situation to only escalate.



Amite County, Mississippi, 1964: Black woman pictured finding comfort in the Church

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English 106 Publishing Co.
December 1, 2016

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