Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos, vol. 27, 2023. Seville, Spain, ISSN1133-309-X, pp 85-104
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/REN.2023.i27.14

HUMAN WASTE DOWN THE SEWER: THE RACIST ABNORMALITIES OF US LIFE IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *THE MAN WHO LIVED UNDERGROUND*[1]

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KEYWORDS: Richard Wright; *The Man Who Lived Underground*; Waste Theory; racism; wastification; police brutality.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Richard Wright; *The Man Who Lived Underground*; Waste Theory; racismo; wastification; brutalidad policial.

ABSTRACT: This article examines the mechanisms that white supremacists apply to conceive of Black people as human waste, and the strategies to counteract them, in Richard Wright's 2021 posthumous work *The Man Who Lived Underground*. The novel narrates the story of Fred Daniels, a young African American man who suffers the harshest aspects of Black life in mid-twentieth century New York City. Leaving work on a Saturday evening, Daniels is arrested on the street by three white police officers, and severely brutalized at the police station. Falsely accused of murder, and forcefully transformed into human waste, the protagonist manages to escape to the sewer system of the Big Apple, undergoing a surreal experience amid the filth and darkness of the tunnels that makes him ponder on the abnormalities of aboveground human relations.
RESUMEN: Este artículo examina los mecanismos que emplea el supremacismo blanco para concebir a las personas negras como

[1] The research for this article was funded by the project "Literature and Globalization 2: Communities of Waste" (ref. PID2019-106798GB-I00), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the AEI (National Research Agency), and the Margarita Salas Postdoctoral Fellowship, financed by the Ministry of Universities of Spain and NextGenerationEU, 2022-2024. Also, I am grateful for the insights provided by the fellow participants in the panel "Disposable Bodies," coordinated by Dr. Rocío Cobo Piñero, at the 16th SAAS Conference in Granada, and the "2nd International Seminar LYG2: Communities of Waste" in A Coruña. Last, my gratitude goes to the anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this article.

residuos humanos, y las estrategias para contrarrestarlos, en la obra póstuma *The Man Who Lived Underground*, de Richard Wright, publicada en 2021. La novela narra la historia de Fred Daniels, un joven afroamericano que sufre los aspectos más duros de la experiencia negra en el Nueva York de mediados del siglo veinte. Saliendo del trabajo un sábado al atardecer, Daniels es arrestado en la calle por tres policías blancos, y gravemente maltratado en la comisaría de policía. Falsamente acusado de homicidio, y transformado forzosamente en residuo humano, el protagonista consigue escapar al sistema de alcantarillado de la Gran Manzana, experimentando una vivencia surrealista entre la suciedad y la oscuridad de los túneles que le hace reflexionar sobre las anormalidades de las relaciones humanas de la superficie.

INTRODUCTION

Originally composed as a novel between mid-1941 and early 1942, Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* was soon rejected by Harper & Brothers' editorial team, who was eager to receive news on another book project following the success of *Native Son* (1940), for reasons that have not officially transpired to date. As the "Note on the Texts" of the 2021 publication explains, the two reviewers of the manuscript at Harper agreed that "the novel was an uneasy mixture of realism and allegory," while one of them "in particular thought the extended depiction of police brutality against a black man in the early chapters 'unbearable'" (Literary Classics 222). The rejection of his novel led Wright to cut its first part out and publish shortened versions of the remaining work. It first appeared as two short excerpts in the 1942 spring issue of Kerker Quinn's literary quarterly *Accent*, and then as a short story in Edwin Seaver's 1944 anthology *Cross-Sections*. The latter version, consisting in a compressed second part and a third part with an altered ending, would constitute the popularized "The Man Who Lived Underground" that was included in Wright's collection of short stories *Eight Men* (1961). The posthumous publication of the original work, more than double the length of the short story, serves justice to its literary quality in its entirety, completing the surreal story of Fred Daniels, and including the insightful essay "Memories of My Grandmother," as the author himself wished back in the 1940s.

Wright states at the beginning of his essay that "I have never written anything in my life that stemmed more from sheer inspiration

[…] than *The Man Who Lived Underground*" ("Memories" 163). His dexterity to intertwine themes such as religion, the blues, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and surrealism, among others, results in a story with several layers where the sensorial and the allegorical constitute key elements in the configuration of the novel's reality. The protagonist, an exemplary twenty-nine-year-old African American man, suffers the harshest aspects of Black life in mid-twentieth century New York City,[2] starting with his racial profiling at the beginning of the narration, and following down a path of racist violence, where he runs across unfounded criminalization, imprisonment threats, coercion, and torture at the hands of three white police officers. Seeking refuge in the sewer system of the Big Apple, Daniels observes the city as an outsider, undergoing a surreal experience amid the filth and darkness of the tunnels that makes him ponder on the normalized abnormalities of human relations that account for the brutalization of Black lives in the urban North. Malcolm Wright, the author's grandson, points out in the "Afterword" to the novel that, when the protagonist finally comes out, "Daniels's attempts to bring back his discoveries tell a compelling story of the excruciating waste of human potential within modern society" (217). In this light, this article examines the mechanisms that white supremacists apply to conceive of Black people as human waste, and the discoveries that Daniels makes at the sewers to counteract them, in *The Man Who Lived Underground*.

BLACK LIFE AND RACIST WASTIFICATION IN THE URBAN NORTH

Wright sets the story of Fred Daniels at a time when the violence inflicted on the Black community, not only by police authorities, had been a systemic problem in the US for long. In 1940, the brutal conditions of life in the Jim Crow South, plus the labor shortages caused by WWII nationwide, led thousands of African Americans to leave for the Northeast, Midwest, and West, inaugurating a period of massive Black migration known as the Second Great Migration. Those who migrated out of the South sought to flee the racist violence that permeated the region, as the racial caste system resulting from the Jim Crow laws established a series of measures that

[2] Although the name of the city is never explicitly mentioned, there are numerous references to streets and some buildings through the novel that clearly indicate that Wright set it in NYC.

legitimized the brutalization of Black lives. The northern context offered African Americans a brighter prospect, yet segregation was no alien there. In his introduction to *Black Metropolis*, Wright, himself a migrant from Mississippi, reflects on northern urbanism as a way of life, noting that "[t]he Jim Crow lives that Negroes live in our crowded cities differ qualitatively from those of whites and are not fully known to whites" (xx). Significantly, Wright uses the phrase "the Jim Crow lives" to encapsulate Black reality in the North, as segregation was, contrary to popular belief, not only confined to the boundaries of the South.

Outside of the Jim Crow South, the system of racial segregation operated in a different guise to subjugate the African American community. In his essay on northern and southern segregation, Matthew Lassiter analyzes the regional dichotomy that the Civil Rights Movement later popularized as "de jure" and "de facto" segregation in the struggle against systemic racism nationwide. According to this perspective, "racial discrimination in the Jim Crow South represented segregation in law (de jure), while residential and educational patterns in the North and West reflected segregation in fact but not enforced by law (de facto)" (Lassiter 26–7). Compared to the pervasive de jure segregation, which was inscribed in the constitutions of the southern states, the de facto variant lay in the tacit agreement between national policymakers and northern liberals. As Lassiter contends:

> As a legal doctrine, "de facto segregation" means "innocent segregation"—spatial landscapes and racial arrangements that exist beyond the scope of judicial remedy, attributably solely to private market forces in the absence of any historical or contemporary government responsibility. (28)

State-sponsored segregation was present in the whole country, yet the national narrative turned it into a southern regional problem. Like Lassiter's work, Jeanne Theoharis combats this popular misconception in her book *A More Beautiful and Terrible History* (2018), pointing out that northern Black activists fought for decades against "redlining and housing segregation, school segregation, job exclusion, discriminatory public services, welfare exclusion, police brutality, and criminalization" (32).

In the second section of his 1955 collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin—along with Ralph Ellison, one of Wright's most notable pupils—offers an incisive description of his

traumatic initiation into northern segregation. Soon after his arrival to New Jersey in 1942, an eighteen-year-old Baldwin collides head-on with a reality that he genuinely thought was restricted to the US South when he is refused service at a local restaurant. As he remarks in his essay:

> I knew about jim-crow but I had never experienced it. I went to the same self-service restaurant three times and stood with all the Princeton boys before the counter [...]; but it was not until the fourth visit that I learned that, in fact, nothing had ever been set before me: I had simply picked something up. Negroes were not served there, I was told [...]. (Baldwin 95)

Much to his surprise, the restaurant was not the only segregated space in the state, for Baldwin later realizes that "[i]t was the same story all over New Jersey, in bars, bowling alleys, diners, places to live. I was always being forced to leave, silently, or with mutual imprecations" (95). The neighboring state of New York presented a similar situation, adding the problems of its overpopulated capital city to the racial disparities of New Jersey, such as the decades-long fight for school desegregation spearheaded by civil rights activist Ella Baker and psychologist Kenneth Clark from the early 1940s. By that time, even the participation of Black soldiers in WWII was severely restricted. As historian Chad Williams documents, "[t]he army rigidly enforced racial segregation, often treating German POWs with more respect than Black servicemen" (308).

Stemming from the onset of slavery, the segregation era perpetuated a racial caste system across the US, with its own particularities in the northern and southern states, that centered on the subjugation of Black people. In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin explores the intricacies of racial inequality in the mid-twentieth century, warning his teenage nephew about a pernicious conception of Black life in the US: "You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being" (293). For decades, white supremacists propagated the image of African Americans as "worthless human beings" in a dehumanizing strategy to legitimize their racial caste system. This narrative responds to a practice extended through modernity that Zygmunt Bauman dissects in his 2004 monograph *Wasted Lives*, where he ponders on the figure of the outcast through his groundbreaking conceptualization of "human waste" or "wasted

humans." For Bauman, this group of people stands as "the 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay" (5). Since the incomplete Reconstruction following the Civil War, white supremacists fought to maintain a second-class citizenship, or a condition of human waste, for African Americans, underpinning a code of conduct and a racial etiquette that banned Black people from certain spaces in normal life across the country, and severely constrained their relation to the world.

This racist perception of human life ultimately lies in the construction of an "other" based on the notion of race. According to his phenomenological philosophy in *Alterity and Transcendence*, first published in French in 1995, Emmanuel Levinas reflects on how the affirmation of a human's existence leads them "[t]o have to answer for ones [*sic*] right to be, not in relation to the abstraction of some anonymous law, some legal entity, but in fear for the other" (23). This encounter with the other can be resolved from an ethical perspective, that is, a good conscience that is intrinsic to human beings, thus resulting in sociality; or from a sovereign position of the "I" in a deviation from ethics, which engenders its modality of the bad conscience. As Levinas points out, "[t]he natural *conatus essendi* of a sovereign *I* is put in question before the face of the other, in the ethical vigilance in which the sovereignty of the *I* recognizes itself as 'hateful'" (32). The predominance of the "hateful I" in the resolution of the encounter with the other accounts for the organization of societies, in that Levinas relates war and violence through history "to the formal principle according to which the *other* limits or cramps the *same*" (56). In the context of the US, its societal organization further responded to a historical pattern of the modern nation-state in which, as Bauman remarks, "sifting out, segregating and disposing of the waste of order-building combined into the main preoccupation and metafunction of the state, as well as providing the foundation for its claims to authority" (33). Race thus constituted the discerning element that the US state applied in the configuration of its racial caste system, seeking to maintain the subjugation of Black people after slavery, while asserting white dominance for the coming generations.

In this scenario, the transformation of a social group into human waste takes place through a process of "wastification" in which the notion of race adds an additional layer to its final outcome. In her 2019 article, Begoña Simal-González conceptualizes "wastification" as a strategy "whereby the environment and the human inhabitants of

certain areas of the world bear the brunt of the unsustainable, unequal configuration of globalized capitalism" (215). Simal-González plays out this process in a concrete neocolonial context, but its applicability extends backward in history. The organization of Western society through modernity evinces the dehumanizing reification of wastification, for Bauman points out that "[w]hen it comes to designing the forms of human togetherness, the waste is human beings" (30). This perspective equates waste with human beings, illuminating an intrinsic relation to dirt that Mary Douglas deeply explores in *Purity and Danger* (1966). In her book, Douglas conceives of dirt as "essentially disorder" (2), and relates this conception to the organization of societies, in that "some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order" (3). Adding the notion of race to the equation, white supremacists constructed the image of blackness as a "pollution" in the US, discriminating against African Americans in their design of the segregated status quo, by means of a process of "*racist wastification*" that entailed "the production of wasted lives out of racial relations" (Fernández Fernández 151).

In the transformation of the other into human waste, Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* plays a central role, as Bauman himself regards it as "the principal category of human waste" (32). *Homo sacer* stands as a juridicopolitical body in ancient Roman law that, as Agamben theorizes, lives on in Western politics as a subject whose "entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide" (183). This figure constitutes the epitome of the excluded being, the other in its antinatural relation to Levinas's "hateful I," both in the secular and the religious sphere. According to the conceptual origins of *homo sacer*, the violence suffered by this ultimate other remains unsanctionable even in the realm of religious ethics. As Agamben documents following Roman scholars Macrobius and Trebatius, "the fact that the killing was permitted implied that the violence done to *homo sacer* did not constitute sacrilege" (81). Agamben's theorizations show how the preservation of *homo sacer* and his life devoid of value have served to buttress the Western status quo through history, for he contends that, "[i]n Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men" (7). Like the role of the "hateful I" in societal organization, *homo sacer* constitutes a core element in the processes of order-building and group formation in modernity.

The biopolitical perspective that Agamben holds in his conceptualization of *homo sacer*, however, proves incomplete when applied to racialized subjects, as works such as Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus* (2014) have extensively demonstrated. In his critique of bare life and biopolitics discourse, Weheliye argues that this:

> not only misconstrues how profoundly race and racism shape the modern idea of the human, it also overlooks or perfunctorily writes off theorizations of race, subjection, and humanity found in black and ethnic studies, allowing bare life and biopolitics discourse to imagine an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization. (4)

To salvage this overgeneralization, Weheliye continues his argument positing that:

> The idea of racializing assemblages, in contrast, construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans. (4)

The latter categorization winds up complementing the theorization of human waste through a racially conscious viewpoint, ultimately evincing the centrality of the notion of race in the abnormal organization of Western societies.

ABOVEGROUND: MECHANISMS FOR RACIST WASTIFICATION

The Man Who Lived Underground plunges the reader into the hostile reality of the urban North from the very first pages of the book, setting the atmosphere of a story that, as Damon Root remarks, "begins as a gritty work of realism before taking an unexpected turn toward the weird and surrealistic" (58). Leaving work on a Saturday evening, Fred Daniels is happily thinking about the money that he has earned that week when, much to his surprise, three white police officers arrest him for no apparent reason on his way home. In the back of the police car, guarded by two policemen, a perplexed Daniels seeks to clear the misunderstanding: "Mister, I ain't done nothing [...] You can ask Mrs. Wooten back there. She just paid me off and I was on my way home" (Wright, *The Man* 8). Yet nothing that he may come up with can ever save him from his interrogation at the police station, as the three officers are determined to incriminate him in the Peabody

case, a double homicide committed next to the place where Daniels's employers live. The racial profiling that he experiences in the street is soon followed by a violent interrogation at Harstdale Station, as the three policemen throw "him into a small, dirty room that had no window" (12) to beat a confession out of him, brutalizing Daniels's body in a cold-blooded rampage of violence.

Officers Lawson, Murphy, and Johnson conceive of Daniels as human waste, and thus feel legitimized to perpetrate their savage beating without remorse. In his 2015 monograph, Carl Zimring explores the historical association between race and waste in the US, tracing its origins back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Zimring notes that, after abolition, "white supremacists stained Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans with assumptions that their skin, bodies, and behaviors were somehow dirtier than the skin, bodies, and behaviors of 'white' people" (6). This mantra has permeated white supremacist ideology ever since, reinforcing their racist construction of Black people, and other racial minorities, as "nonhumans." Susan Morrison follows a similar perspective in *The Literature of Waste*, where she contends that "[t]he rhetoric of othering those of a different race, religion, ethnicity, or gender constructs them as unclean or inhuman" (98). This relation between dirt and dehumanization, which draws on Douglas's approach, results in a social subject, the wasted human, to which different degrees of violence are inflicted without consequences, in consonance with his/her intrinsic bare life. In this context, the three white officers feel morally and legally free to beat Daniels, for they seek a confession to a crime that, from the moment they catch a glimpse of his skin color, they are convinced he has committed: "[y]ou're playing a game, but we'll break you, even if we have to kill you!" (12).

The violence in the small room pushes the story into a sordid dimension where the protagonist achieves a dream-like, or rather nightmarish, state that will accompany him throughout the rest of the novel. Hardly recovering consciousness after the beating, Daniels is forced to sign a confession that he is not able to read in front of the district attorney, which puts an end to the violence that he experiences at the police station. The policemen then drive him to the crime scene to scrutinize his reaction, and Daniels remains disoriented during the entire visit to the Peabody home. For a moment, he is even convinced that the victims are still alive: "Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Peabody would come out of some room at any moment now and tell them that they were wildly wrong, and then he would wake up out of this mad dream" (32).

When he passes out at the crime scene, Lawson kicks him gently so that he regains consciousness, and the protagonist awakes to a sudden realization:

> it was that what these men said, what he said, the blows and curse words, were all neutral and powerless to alter the feeling that, though he had done nothing wrong, he was condemned, lost, inescapably guilty of some nameless deed. (36)

His racist wastification reaches a peak at this point, in that, morally and physically defeated, he internalizes the conception of human waste that white supremacists hold of Black people. Pondering the notion of race in *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe contends that "race is one of the raw materials from which difference and *surplus*—a kind of life that can be wasted and spent without limit—are produced" (34), which accounts for the intrinsic relation between racialization and wastification, while revealing the forces that Daniels has been resisting up to his dire realization.

The critique of advanced industrial society that Herbert Marcuse undertakes in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) sheds further light on the process of wastification that Wright's tragic hero suffers in the big metropolis. Dissecting the repressive administration of society in the mid-twentieth century, Marcuse posits that:

> The distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation—liberation also from that which is tolerable and rewarding and comfortable—while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society. (7)

The segregated society of the US translated into an "affluent society" dominated by the white elites, which propagated their white supremacist tenets nationwide, and an oppressed Black community, organized around pre-civil rights activism, that continued to fight for factual liberation. In this context, African Americans were exposed to gratuitous forms of violence in different degrees across the country that ultimately sought to perpetuate the regime of segregation. One of the conditions that Marcuse identifies in the repressive administration of society is that "the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste" (7). Significantly, the racial caste system of segregation depended on the wastification of the Black

population to exist, resorting to a large array of powers to ensure that this process always came to fruition.

As a human waste, Daniels is taken to his wife before his imprisonment, while his sensation of being immersed in a dream intensifies. At his apartment, his disorientation leads him to question the reality of what he is experiencing, up to a point where he asks himself: "Is this a dream?" (38). The irruption at his house in the company of Murphy ends up triggering his wife's sudden labor and their urgent trip to the hospital in the back seat of the police car. When they arrive, the little strength that Daniels has summoned to carry his wife gives in, forcing him to let Murphy take her inside, and the nightmarish sensation pervades him again: "[h]e felt lost; as long as he had held her in his arms, he had felt that there was the barest chance that he might elude the shroud of mist that surrounded him. But with Rachel gone, he was lost…" (44). His mind continues to drift away while his wife is in labor, and he is incapable of discerning where he is and why he is there. Yet, when Murphy loses sight of him for a moment, "[a]n impulse, not a thought, but just a vague gathering of all the forces of his body urged him to escape, to run off while there was time" (47). Out at the street, he evades the three policemen under the rain, until he descends through a "gaping manhole" (51) underground, eventually finding refuge in the sewers of NYC.

UNDERGROUND: DISMANTLING WASTIFICATION

Soon after landing into the dark waters of the sewer, "[t]he odor of fresh rot had become so general that he no longer had the sensation of smelling it" (57). As the opening line of the second part of the novel describes, Daniels gets easily used to the atmosphere of the underground, setting out on his exploration of a raceless world that is not bound to any rule. He has descended into a world of "abjection" that, in accordance with Julia Kristeva's theorizations, stands "[o]n the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (2). The protagonist first runs into a small cave that will become his temporary home, and peers through a crack on the walls to discover that he is under a Black church, experiencing an epiphanic revelation triggered by its gospel choir. Being himself a devoted parishioner, he now feels that:

> A physical distance had come between them and had conferred upon him a terrifying knowledge. He felt that these people should stand

> silent, unrepentant, with simple manly pride, and yield no quarter in whimpering. He wanted them to assume a heroic attitude even though *he himself* had run away from *his* tormentors, even though he had begged *his* accusers to believe in *his* innocence. (63)

Daniels's initial detachment from his life aboveground provides him with a different perspective on humanity, while he begins to deconstruct the value system of the US racial caste system. To do so, he fuses with his abject environment in a coping mechanism of survival, becoming a different subject in the sewers. Kristeva describes this type of existence as that of "a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing" (8). In this guise, Daniels begins to distance himself from the constrained rules of human relations aboveground, embarking on a path of self-discovery in which he will get rid of his imposed condition of human waste.

Continuing his excursions down the tunnels, which include numerous references to material waste and dirt, the protagonist finds the way to venture into various spaces aboveground, bringing back important objects and reflections with him each time. These brief irruptions into the upper world are part of his re-education in the sewers, which Susan Mayberry describes as a "process of enlightenment" that leads to "his growing awareness of the vulnerable human condition and the universal human culpability that renders human life and love highest absolutes" (74).[3] Daniels first runs across an undertaker's establishment, where he steals a toolbox that soon becomes essential for his journey underground. Using his new tools, he manages to emerge in the basement of a movie house. The laughing audience and the "the jerking shadows" (74) on the screen that he encounters when he climbs up the staircase trigger another of his key revelations in the novel. In a similar mindset to that raised by the gospel singing, Daniels considers addressing "the people [who] were *laughing* at their *lives*, at the animated shadows of themselves," (74) to wake them up to the abnormalities of human relations, but soon realizes the futility of his intentions. As the narrator points out, "[n]o; it could not be done. He could not awaken them. He sighed; yes, they were children, sleeping in their living, awake in their dying" (75). In

[3] Mayberry, Fabre, Gines, McNallie, and Ridenour deal with the short story in their articles, but their analyses do also apply to the novel, in that its second and third part were already present in the final short-story version.

the eyes of the people aboveground, the abject Daniels of the sewers would not only stand as a human waste in a figurative sense, but also as a physical "nonhuman" in his current state covered in dirt. According to Kristeva, "[t]he abject confronts us […] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*" (12) and, as such, his irruption in front of the audience would only wreak havoc, while his denunciation, were he able to verbalize it, would be perceived as that of a madman.

The revelation that he experiences at the movie house affects the first of his nightmares back at the cave, illuminating the pernicious sense of guilt that US society has instilled into him. The protagonist dreams about a baby and a woman sinking down the grey currents of the sewer, while he desperately tries to save them walking over water as, in Robin McNallie's words, "a strangely powerless Jesus" (81). He first tries to put the baby in safety and then comes back for the mother, but the two of them end up drowning just as Daniels "opened his mouth to call for help and water rushed into his lungs and he choked" (80). For McNallie,

> these "images" of Daniels's cave have a potency absent in the images of escapism purveyed by the movie house, for these internal images lead Daniels not toward escape but toward discovery of a necessary, albeit harrowing, knowledge. (81)

His learning process continues following an abrupt awakening, since he is too unsettled to sleep after the nightmare and decides to go on with his expedition. He sneaks into a radio shop, where he steals a radio, and then emerges into a meat market, from which he returns to the cave with a steel cleaver. Daniels has no qualms about his petty thefts, although he does carry his existential guilt throughout the novel. As Imany Perry remarks, "[d]eprivation has made him no longer value material wealth. And yet, deprivation has also made him, for a time, feel less morally culpable for what he does."

Daniels's subsequent thefts have a higher value in the materialistic aboveground, but the stolen goods acquire a different meaning in the underground. His next stop takes him to a real estate and insurance agency where he is almost caught by its workers—a woman even catches a glimpse of him, but the protagonist makes it back to the sewers undiscovered. Allured by the safe of the agency, he spies the combination from his hole, resolving to come back at night

for its hidden treasure, and witnesses "the white hand" picking up the money from it. Daniels becomes suddenly annoyed at this sight:

> He's stealing, he said. He grew indignant, as if he owned the money. Though *he* had planned to steal the money, he despised and pitied the man. His stealing the money and the man's stealing the money were entirely two different things. (88)

He sees the valuable objects of the aboveground in a new light and seems to approach his theft as a meaningless act: "He just wanted to steal the money merely for the sensation involved" (88). Yet his eventual theft does have meaning—and consequences—both in the aboveground and the underground. First, Daniels is stealing from an agency that "collected hundreds of dollars in rent from poor colored folks" (90), thus exacting revenge on behalf of his community. And, second, he is demonstrating the absence of value that the wads of bills, and the typewriter that he also takes back with him, acquire in the underground. As the protagonist himself declares, "[t]hey were the toys of the men who lived in the dead world of sunshine and rain" (91).

Back at his cave, Daniels plays with some of the objects that he has obtained from the aboveground, decorating his temporary home in a very peculiar manner. He uses the bills from the real estate and insurance agency to paper the walls of the cave in a gesture that evinces the uselessness of money in the underground. When he completes the task, "[h]e stepped back and cocked his head. Jesus! That's funny …! He slapped his thighs and guffawed. He had triumphed over the world aboveground. He was *free*!" (95). Daniels feels free from the racial capitalist society of the US, and ridicules the abnormal organization of society aboveground. As Perry contends, "[v]iewed from below, the social world, the economy—all manner of ordered things—are clearly absurd." His last theft takes place in a jewelry shop from which he steals a gun, a cartridge belt, several golden watches, a ring, and a jar full of diamonds. Like the dollar bills, the precious stones serve him as decoration for the floor of his cave, resulting in another defiant mockery of the value of these luxurious commodities aboveground. As Michel Fabre argues, "[a]lone in his cave, Daniels tries to elaborate his universe in an ironical antithesis to what is considered the normal world" (171).

In his lawless underworld, the protagonist does not feel any remorse for his actions—it would be pointless—while his process of enlightenment continues. Right after papering the walls, he describes

"this room" as "his main hideout; between him and the world that had rejected him would stand this mocking symbol" (95). Daniels does not wallow on his solitude at any moment of his stay in the sewers, perhaps due to the primal sense of survival that his environment demands. As Fabre points out, "rather than brooding over past humiliations, he sees his exclusion more as an opportunity to scrutinize his culture from the outside" (171). This perspective proves key in his learning underground. Sleeping at his cave after scattering the diamonds, Daniels experiences his greatest epiphanic revelation when he is awakened by the gospel of the church:

> And then a strange and new knowledge overwhelmed him: He was *all people*. In some unutterable fashion he was *all* people and they were *he*; by the identity of their emotions they were one, and he was one with them. [...] Yet even with this knowledge, [...], another knowledge swept through him too, banishing all fear and doubt and loss: He now knew too the inexpressible value and importance of himself. (106–7)

As his process of enlightenment reaches its completion, the protagonist fully rids himself of the condition of human waste that the aboveground world has imposed on him, while he comes to terms with a condition of being that relates him equally to the entire humanity. As Ronald Ridenour notes, "[a]rmed with this wisdom, he joyously sought to communicate to his fellow man, in order to rid man of his despair" (57) and, as a reborn subject, he resolves to return soon aboveground.

Before this happens, Daniels revisits the scenes of his robberies in a final excursion that completes his learning process underground. Set into motion one last time by the gospel choir, he retraces his steps to the real estate and insurance agency, and sees how Lawson, his own tormentor, brutalizes one of the workers, who is being falsely accused of stealing. Daniels considers coming out to confess his own theft, but then resolves not to do so, for he understands that "this unfounded accusation was merely serving to bring to the man's attention, for the first time in his life, the secret of his existence" (122). The white worker winds up putting an end to his life with a gun, while a terrified Daniels witnesses the whole scene from the basement. Moving on, the protagonist also peeps through a hole how Murphy tortures the jewelry shop's white watchman, and then hears how Johnson beats a Black youth at the radio shop, both men accused of his own robberies. As Kathryn Gines contends, along

with the "existential themes of flight, guilt, life, death, dread, and freedom, we see Wright in effect bearing witness to the absurdity of the world aboveground" (50), especially in this succession of scenes where innocent people are gratuitously brutalized by the abusive policemen, triggering Daniels's final departure from the sewers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When the protagonist emerges aboveground in Part Three, the briefest of the novel, he is determined to share his revelation with the world. McNallie reads Wright's story through Plato's famous Allegory of the Cave from *The Republic*, contending that "[t]he motive that brings Daniels back aboveground may be the same one that brings Plato's prisoner back to the cave with his discovery—compassion for his fellows in their deluded state" (83). In a similar context to that of Plato's prisoner, the world does not understand what Wright's tragic hero is trying to communicate. No one pays attention to his message on universal human fraternity, and the three police officers, now that the true murderer is under arrest, only interact with him to ensure that he remains silent about their abuses. For Gines, "[h]e is a prisoner who escapes bondage and whose journey into underground blackness allows him to see what is 'real' more clearly and accurately" (50), yet he is utterly unable to communicate his reflections at the hostile aboveground, as his thoughts seem to disintegrate at his strenuous efforts to verbalize them. Daniels, in a desperate attempt to share his revelation, brings the officers to the entrance of the sewer. And there, under the rainy night, Lawson finally realizes the threat that such revelation poses to the status quo, resolving to shoot an astonished protagonist dead in cold blood. As his body sinks in the dark waters of the sewer, his message to the world does too, getting lost forever amid the grey dirt of a racist capitalist society that conceives Black people as nothing else than human waste.

The racial caste system that brutalizes Daniels's life and attempts to dispose of him in a US prison, a space that Bauman regards as "a dumping ground for human waste" (82), winds up eliminating him through one of its white supremacist guardians. His racist wastification in the novel not only involves a pernicious narrative on the historical association of race with waste in the US, but a physical and psychological decline through racial profiling, unfounded criminalization, imprisonment threats, coercion, and torture. This variety of abuses adds to the racial disparities that Black

people suffered daily in the urban North under de facto segregation, which Daniels had learned to dodge with considerable success until his fateful encounter with the police. From the underground, the protagonist scrutinizes the bowels of the US racial caste system, noticing the series of normalized abnormalities that have kept it in motion for generations. This dehumanizing system of oppression also affects the white citizens for which it was allegedly designed, in that the uncontrollable violence that it breeds ends up not distinguishing between races, as the examples of police brutality that Daniels witnesses from the sewers instantiate in the second part of the novel. In the end, his message of universal human fraternity aims at dismantling the condition of human waste that the US racial caste system has imposed on Black people, while restoring their damaged and intrinsic humanity, and ultimately ridding the whole country of its white supremacist spiral of violence.

Despite his bleak ending, Daniels does triumph over the world aboveground, and does get to deliver his message, though to an antagonistic receiver. His killing at the hands of officer Lawson reveals that the policeman has received the message, conceding the protagonist a momentary respite from his burdening, unsuccessful attempts to communicate it. This scene responds to the logic of the aboveground world, for his fate is already sealed from the moment he resolves to share his new knowledge with his tormentors. As Wright remarks in his essay, "the spot where improvisation takes place is the sewer" ("Notes" 193), while the upper world continues to be operated by the same old rules. The reborn Daniels rebels against them in and out of the sewer, making his intentions clear as soon as he meets the policemen in his return aboveground: "I just didn't want to run no more" (141). His courageous confrontation sets a perfect example for Marcuse's conception of "the Great Refusal—the protest against that which is" (63), in that he is breaking with the status quo, as well as exuding his condition of "full human" before the racist policemen. In this sense, *The Man Who Lived Underground* succeeds in his denunciation of the normalized abnormalities of human relations, offering alternate strategies to dismantle the mechanisms that white supremacist apply to conceive of Black people as human waste. That the oppressed, as Marcuse notes, "start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period" (257), as Black activism did prove after a decades-long battle against segregation in the mid-twentieth century across the US.

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