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Names, Violence, and the African American Vernacular in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*

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Names, Violence, and the African American Vernacular in Richard Wright's The Outsider

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
American Literature

By

Sarah D. Bailly

B. A. Louisiana State University, 2005

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In loving memory of my mother, Peggy Hopkins

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Abstract

An analysis of the names and violence in Richard Wright's The Outsider reveals Wright's aesthetic program for the novel. Wright's recurring themes and the meanings of the name and aliases of his protagonist are indicative of African American vernacular tradition. Despite Wright's physical distance from African American life in the United States at the time of the novel's writing, he still conveys a strong connection to the African American experience, linking that experience with the suffering of all oppressed people. By using the idea of double-consciousness and various forms of signification, including masking, naming, and improvisation, Wright locates his work within the African American folk tradition and celebrates the freedom and subversive nature of African American expression.

Key Words: Richard Wright—The Outsider—African American Vernacular—Jazz—improvisation—masking—trickster figure—naming—violence—French Existentialism—Cross Damon—double-consciousness

Introduction

The moment is the reciprocal and contradictory envelopment of the before by the after. One is still what one is going to cease to be and already what one is going to become. One lives one's death, one dies one's life. One feels oneself to be one's own self and another; the eternal is present in an atom of duration. In the midst of the fullest life, one has a foreboding that one will merely survive, one is afraid of the future. It is a time of anguish and of heroism, of pleasure and of destruction.—Jean-Paul Sartre

Richard Wright wrote The Outsider in 1953 while living in Paris. His Left Bank perspective and his close relationships with the French existentialists inform the novel's philosophical complexity. As an expatriate in France, he came into contact with several European intellectuals, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who welcomed him into their intellectual and social circles. Informed by the ideas of European philosophers-- Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, among others—Wright formed new ideas about the human condition. He began to explore new topics in his literature, and his concern for the future and well-being of African Americans transformed into a broader concern for the future and well-being of all oppressed peoples.

The Outsider reflects Wright's ideological shift from a preoccupation with Marxist theory to the more individualistic concerns of French existentialism. The novel's central character, Cross Damon, embodies the modern, existential dilemma, finding meaning in a meaningless world. Unlike Native Son's Bigger Thomas who is controlled by his social status, Cross Damon refuses to accept the identity conferred on him by society. He is an outsider in both the white-dominated world of the United States and in the African American community. When Cross is afforded the opportunity to (re)create himself, he flees his past and enters into a process of becoming, an essential element in Sartrean existentialism.

The five-part novel spans a period of about two months. The reader first encounters Cross Damon, an unhappy postal worker, leaving his nightshift post to go consume a bottle of whiskey. He is trapped in a failing marriage and possibly facing statutory rape charges from a girlfriend he did not know was underage. His mother is disappointed in him, his wife manipulates the situation with his girlfriend, and he is contemplating suicide. Fortuitously, Cross is in a subway accident from which he escapes unscathed. The authorities, however, mistake someone else's body for his and proclaim him dead. Cross is afforded the freedom to leave his past behind and (re)create himself. The reader follows him to New York City where his search for meaning and purpose turns into a violent struggle against ideologies and the limits of personal freedom.

Two dominant elements in The Outsider enrich Wright's philosophical inquiry: names and violence. Wright's use of names in the novel reflects his desire to insert meaning into the nihilistic world of the novel. As Cross Damon attempts to gain control over his life, his name, his aliases, and the names of the characters around him reveal a deeper system at work in the novel's world. The excessive violence in the novel demonstrates another element of human existence, the ability to take life, to erase names. As Cross tries to find meaning in his life, changing his name and killing or abusing those around him, the moment, what Sartre calls "the envelopment of the before by the after" (378), surfaces as the essential component of identity. For Cross, and for Wright, violence becomes an act of creation, in which the named body rebels against itself and against others in impulsive acts of existence.

Wright constantly employs the idea of transformation throughout The Outsider, and this theme arises most obviously in Cross's fluctuating identity. The protagonist assumes three names in the novel—Charles Webb, Addison Jordan, and Lionel Lane. The narrator continues to

refer to the protagonist as “Cross Damon” throughout the novel. This name is illustrative, for it is “a mixture of the Christian ethic of suffering and of the demonism of Nietzsche” (Fabre, Unfinished 366). This double-sided identity calls to mind W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of double-consciousness, locating Cross Damon within the African American vernacular tradition. Cross’s ability to assume various masks and to name himself also identifies him as a trickster figure whose double vision or double-consciousness allows him to manipulate others’ perceptions of him. Henry Louis Gates’s theory of the Signifying Monkey—about which much more will be said later—helps to elucidate Cross’s role as the African American trickster. Along with these particular African American rhetorical strategies, Wright makes use of the jazz trope in The Outsider as Cross participates in improvisation. Cross’s aliases are also related to prominent jazz figures. While Wright’s later works, particularly The Outsider, are not usually associated with the African American vernacular and folk expression, his attention to subtle detail does place the novel within this cultural tradition.

Scholars and critics, such as James N. Rhea and Lorraine Hansberry, take note of, and oftentimes dismiss, Wright for not employing the African American Vernacular in his works; however, his existential protagonist reverts to the African American tradition, embodied in jazz, to identity himself. Scholars, such as Michel Fabre and Amritjit Singh, and even Wright himself, claim that The Outsider is not a race novel, in the sense that Native Son and Black Boy are works centered on race. The central action revolves more around Cross’s struggle with being human than around race relations. While the novel explores philosophical questions, it also delves into the problems of being a black intellectual. Cross does not see himself as any color, but the world of the novel assesses his worth by the color of his skin. It is in this torn state of mind that the reader finds Cross Damon and follows him through a journey of self-identification.

Chapter One:
Disentanglement

The cover art for the 1993 Harper Perennial paperback edition of The Outsider conveys the novel's central message. In David Diaz's cubistic illustration, a man faces toward the viewer and toward the right side of the cover. The illustration depicts two faces on one head, an image that evokes the image of the Greek god Janus and the notion of double-consciousness. Diaz has illustrated many covers of the early 1990s Harper editions of Wright's works, and, for each book, Diaz poignantly captures Wright's texts in stark, modernistic images. His cover for The Outsider is much more relevant than Irving Miller's design on Harper's first edition of the novel—a close-up of glass shattered by a bullet, set against a black background. While cover art rarely encompasses the full content of a book, it does offer a window into the text and shapes the reader's initial perception of a work.

The difference between the cover illustrations on these two editions is significant in its relation to the ways in which scholars and critics have approached Wright's The Outsider from the novel's publication in 1953 to the early twenty-first century. Early studies on The Outsider often discuss the novel either as a continuation of the racial issues Wright presents in Native Son and in Black Boy or as a novel of philosophical ideas superimposed on a naturalistic murder mystery. In his 1953 review of the novel in the New York Times Book Review, Granville Hicks applauds Wright's "effort to come to terms with his feelings about the human condition" (35). Writing on the same day as Hicks, James N. Rhea maintains that The Outsider is a horrible novel. Rhea, along with other critics such as Arna Bontemps and Lorraine Hansberry, thinks Wright's years in Paris left him out of touch with race relations in America.¹ However, Wright

did not intend The Outsider to be a “race novel.” As Cross Damon expresses in one of his meditative moments, he “would have battled desperately for any Negro trapped in a racial conflict, but his character has been so shaped that his decisive life struggle was a personal fight for the realization of himself” (195).² Orville Prescott recognizes that “it is not primarily his [Cross’s] plight as a Negro, but as a thinking, questioning man in the perplexing twentieth century that concerns Mr. Wright” (29). Although Hicks, Prescott, and others applaud Wright’s ability to address philosophical questions and issues of modernity in the novel, most early reviewers find The Outsider inferior to Wright’s previous works and dismiss the novel as an overtly violent and highly contrived murder mystery.³

Critical comments that have followed these initial mixed reviews suggest that scholars still struggle with the meaning and implications of Wright’s third novel. Some scholarship focuses on the relationship between Wright’s own life in Paris and The Outsider. In his chapter “Richard Wright and the French Existentialists,” Wright’s biographer, Michel Fabre, notes his interactions and relationships with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. Fabre claims that both Wright and “the French Existentialists were addressing similar problems: the responsibility of the intellectual, the defense of humanistic values, the importance of solidarity, [and] the relationship between truth and freedom” (162). Wright’s attention to these issues in The Outsider reflects both his growing global perspective and his belief in the beneficence of the individual. Kingsley Widmer notes that the novel is “one of the very few consciously existentialist works in American literature” (13), but that “Wright appears unable to stick to existentialist qualities” (20). Amritjit Singh is also wary of “responding to The Outsider as an existentialist novel” (129). As Singh points out, Wright and the French Existentialists “arrived at their positions from different directions” (123). Wright’s humanism developed from

his first-hand experience with oppression, and Sartre's humanistic philosophy was the product of his observation of imperialism and exploitation. Frequently, as evident in the treatment of Marxism in Native Son, Wright attempts to both recognize and disparage ideological and philosophical beliefs; existentialist philosophy in The Outsider is no exception to Wright's scrutiny. Yoshinobu Hakutani underlines this scrutiny in his comparison between Wright's The Outsider and Albert Camus's The Stranger. For Hakutani, both Wright and Camus express French existentialist ideas, but Wright places more emphasis on the "search of an essence in the meaningless existence" while Camus takes a more nihilistic stance with a protagonist who is at home in his meaninglessness (165). While many critics and readers have expected Wright to follow Native Son and Black Boy with another novel concerning the struggles of African Americans, Wright sought to use his insight into the oppression of African Americans to comment on the overall human condition.

Other studies focus on the psychological aspects of The Outsider. In the chapter "The Existential Freud: The Outsider; Savage Holiday," Edward Margolies finds Wright's characterization unconvincing because it is unbelievable that Cross Damon shows no remorse for the crimes he commits. Furthermore, Margolies maintains that "Wright has created allegorical figures whom he has described in a naturalistic context. The resulting confusion accounts for the failure of the novel" (137). However, not all critics have such a reductive view of Wright's interest in psychology and the way this interest manifests itself in his literature. Abdul R. JanMohamed presents his interpretation of the novel in Freudian and Lacanian terms. For JanMohamed, The Outsider is "an expressionist death-dream-work," and Cross Damon's "constant self-examination cannot help but reveal...the underlying Oedipal preoccupations and the death drive that fuel his life" (176). Like JanMohamed, Mae Henderson views Cross's

struggle as his conflict with self-denial and claims that “the text demonstrates the relationship between Cross’s sexuality and his aggressiveness” (399). Both JanMohamed and Lâle Demirtürk maintain that the novel exists on two planes and embodies two plots, one, the protagonist’s external struggle with the forces outside himself, and the other, his internal conflict in the realm of ideas. These more complex interpretations of The Outsider necessitate not only a reevaluation of the philosophy and psychology of Wright’s third novel but also a reassessment of his artistic program for the novel.

Although scholars and critics undertake insightful readings of The Outsider, they often fail to examine Wright’s literary creativity. In the somewhat frustrated introduction to Richard Wright’s Art of Tragedy, Joyce Ann Joyce states that after “studying most of the criticism on Wright to date [1986]...the student does not get a sense of Wright’s artistry” (xiv). Joyce goes on to say that “most studies dealing with Wright’s canon discuss his recurring themes and his life, but not his art” (1). Her observations of Wright scholarship reflect even the most recent studies on The Outsider; Wright’s art is always second to his politics, philosophy, and psychology. James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison often evaluate Wright’s works according to his personality and political affiliations.⁴ Their close relationships with Wright and their lasting literary influence may have tainted otherwise unbiased readings of Wright’s works. While some scholars are more inclined than others to grant Wright the “artist” title, there seems to be reluctance about studying The Outsider’s artistic merits.⁵ Through such analysis, though, the insightfulness of Wright’s naturalism comes to light, and the negative interpretations associated with his overtly violent subject-matter subside.

Diaz’s cover illustration—the two-faced man—presents a concept that most scholars have ignored in their examinations of The Outsider. Like Miller’s design on the first edition of

the novel, depicting a scene that does not even occur in Wright's text, many scholars and critics imbue their interpretations of The Outsider with extra-textual issues. While examining the socio-political factors that shape the novel is not an unworthy endeavor, failing to provide a close reading of Wright's text disregards Wright's role as author, as literary artist. What Diaz's cover design initially presents to the reader are the notions of self-reflection and of double-consciousness that permeate Cross Damon's quest throughout the novel. Janus-like, Cross Damon simultaneously faces past and present; he must shed his former self and confront his inner turmoil in order to (re)create himself. He also typifies the plight of the non-white intellectual, someone shaped by, but excluded by, Western discourse. Diaz's cover art also suggests the idea of masking and of assuming varied identities. This double-faced image and these concepts emerge in the names Cross Damon adopts as he moves from one social sphere to another. In Cross's pursuit of identity, violence becomes for him an integral, if not a necessary, mode of self-expression.

End Notes

¹ Arna Bontemps claims that Wright's "roll in the hay with the existentialism of Sartre" has corrupted his writing talent (16). Lorraine Hansberry claims that Wright "exalts brutality and nothingness; he negates the reality of our struggle for freedom and yet works energetically in behalf of our oppressors; he has lost his own dignity and destroyed his talent" (7).

² All references to The Outsider are to the 1993 Harper Perennial edition.

³ Other positive reviews include those by the following: Harvey Curtis Webster, Lewis Vogler, and Max Eastman. Negative reviews include those by Milton Rugoff, Roi Ottley, and J. Saunders Redding.

⁴ In "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin attacks Native Son for being too violent and reactionary. Baldwin provides a somewhat sentimental eulogy in "Alas, Poor Richard," in which he claims that he "distrusted his [Wright's] association with the French intellectuals" (249). For Ellison's view of Wright, see "Richard Wright's Blues."

⁵ In their psychological studies of the novel, Abdul R. JanMohamed and Mae Henderson briefly note Wright's use of imagery and the African American vernacular, particularly that of the jazz tradition, as they lay out their analyses.

Chapter Two:

The Universe Is Colored!

The notion of double-consciousness that characterizes Cross Damon motivates his desire to alter his identity. Although Wright did not conceive of The Outsider as a novel dealing with racism and the predicament of African Americans in the United States, W. E. B. Du Bois's well-known conception of black identity allows Wright to bestow on his protagonist the "longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (Du Bois 11). Wright adopts Du Bois's paradigm, but, according to some scholars, he alters Du Bois's double-consciousness to fit the philosophical and psychological concerns of his novel. Paul Gilroy claims that Wright extends Du Bois's term "so that its unconscious aspects become more significant" (161). This more psychological view of double-consciousness surfaces in Frank McMahon's estimation that "Wright's focus is instead on the internal crisis of self-division and its destructive potential" (12). While Gilroy and McMahon provide insightful readings of The Outsider and the ways double-consciousness informs Cross Damon's conflict, they fail to appreciate Du Bois's complicated notion of double-consciousness. DuBois states that

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,-- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (11)

DuBois's description suggests that double-conscious, especially at the time of his writing, can contain a good deal of "destructive potential." Furthermore, Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., points out that one of the sources of Du Bois's term is within the field of psychology (303). Du Bois also conceives of double-consciousness as the tension between African, or black, spirituality and white discourse (Bruce 301). Viewed through this lens, double-consciousness, as it operates in The Outsider, represents more than just a psychological struggle; it provides a racial backdrop to Cross's search for identity and enriches Wright's presentation of the black intellectual.

Wright did not want readers to interpret The Outsider as a "race novel;" that is, he wanted readers to realize that Cross Damon's plight is the plight of every person in the modern world. With this in mind, however, the reader must be aware that Wright believes that history places African Americans in the particular condition of oppression that affords them the ability to observe Western society and discourse from the outside. As his character Ely Houston states in the second book of the novel, "They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time" (163). Houston, a white man with a hunchback, thinks that his particular condition also affords him the same outsider perspective because to be black when Wright was composing The Outsider was to be considered or treated as "deformed." In this sense, race is an important factor in the novel, and Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness explains the role race plays in Cross's life and in the development of Wright's philosophical ideas.

Double-consciousness not only provides a psychological framework for The Outsider; it also surfaces in Wright's structural program for the novel. As mentioned earlier, JanMohamed and Demirtürk conceive of the novel as composed of two plots, or two spheres of action. In

JanMohamed's psychological study, Cross's conflicts manifest themselves on both conscious and sub-conscious levels. On the conscious level, Cross must contend with the physical impediments that hinder his search for an identity in his (re)creation of himself. He must secure a name and a birth certificate, he must find shelter and safety from being found out, and he must physically confront members of the communist party who seek to undermine him. On the sub-conscious level, Cross is in search of meaning and purpose in his life, and this search is informed by philosophical and psychological epiphanies he experiences throughout the course of the novel. For Demirtürk, "the dominant plot has no visible connection with race-ness, [sic] whereas the suppressed story addresses it" (283). The novel's plot, therefore, possesses its own sort of double-consciousness (perhaps quadruple if one considers the psychological plot as separate from the race/raceless plot structure). Readers may interpret JanMohamed's conscious plot as that of the Western half of Cross Damon's double-consciousness; the black side arises in what JanMohamed names the latent plot. The correlation to Demirtürk's two plots is much more analogous to Du Bois's conception of double-consciousness as a split between two cultural modes of being. In both cases, Wright's literary technique in The Outsider appears much more artistic than some have claimed. If the plot is highly contrived, as it may be in this semi-allegorical story, it does possess a distinct thematic thread that enhances its literary substance.

A more recent theory of African American literature also illuminates Wright's artistry in The Outsider. In The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates, presents a theory that addresses both the African American author's rhetorical strategies and the ways in which one may uncover, or interpret, those strategies within a black text.⁶ Most importantly, Gates states, "Whereas black writers most certainly revise texts in the Western tradition, they often seek to do so 'authentically,' with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black

vernacular” (xxii). This notion of the “double-voiced” text, whose “literary antecedents are both white and black novels” (xxiii) implicitly evokes Du Bois’s notion of double-consciousness. Gates’s study does place a good deal of emphasis on the black vernacular as a crucial element of signification in African American literature. This emphasis would seemingly exclude many of Wright’s later texts, for, as evident in the early reviews of The Outsider, many critics feel that Wright lost his authentic black voice when he moved to Paris in 1946 and that this loss appears in his attempt to avoid the question of race in his third novel. On the contrary, Wright is more subtle than those reviewers think, especially in The Outsider which simultaneously disregards and acknowledges the problems of racism in the modern world.⁷ The Outsider adequately fits Gates’s theory, for Wright is also indebted to many of the Western masters—Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Dreiser, Joyce, Conrad, James, Melville, and Poe among others—for his literary themes, artistic presentation, and authorial voice (Fabre “Wright’s First Hundred Books”). The African American vernacular surfaces in the novel as Cross interacts with other African Americans, illustrating Wright’s sensitivity to the nuances of masking and of improvisation in the life of a black intellectual. Not only does Wright draw on both Western and African American rhetoric in composing The Outsider, he also invests his protagonist with this double-vision, this double-consciousness, which allows him to face two ways at once and to develop a hybrid identity. The intersection of Western and black modes of expression informs a more effective reading of the novel, and Gate’s theory of Esu Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey provides invaluable insight into Wright’s art and into Cross Damon’s actions.

According to Gates, the mythic West African figure Esu Elegbara helps to explain the formation and perpetuation of particular tropes and themes in the African American literary tradition. In Yoruba culture, both in Africa and in the African Diaspora, Esu is a trickster figure

and a messenger of the gods who “serves as a figure for the nature and function of interpretation and double-voiced utterance” (xxi). Gates envisions Esu as a symbol of literary criticism because he has the ability to read different meanings into divine and sacred texts (21). Accompanying Esu is the notion of multiplicity in the meanings of words and of the ability to transform or subvert meanings. For Gates, Esu represents the ability of a text to be more than one thing. This concept, which parallels the idea of double-consciousness, is valuable in an examination of The Outsider, for it helps to explain and to elucidate the various levels of meaning within the novel.

Esu’s African American derivative is the figure Gates calls the Signifying Monkey. The Signifying Monkey operates as the “figure-of-figures, as the trope in which are encoded several other peculiarly black rhetorical tropes” (xxi). Whereas Esu represents the ability to interpret the various meanings of a text, the Signifying Monkey symbolizes the ability to create those various meanings. For Gates, the double-voiced black text, that which speaks to other texts both white and black, consists of the following textual relations: tropological revision, the repetition, with difference, of a certain trope in multiple texts; the speakerly text, which makes use of “free indirect discourse” to unite “the direct discourse of the novel’s black speech community and the initial standard English of the narrator”; talking texts, the fact that “black texts ‘talk’ to other black texts”; and rewriting the speakerly, which involves revising a preceding text “in an act of homage” (xxv-xxvii). These four explanations of black rhetorical strategies facilitate the reader’s understanding of Wright’s art. The theme of double-consciousness in The Outsider undergoes a tropological revision; it explains Cross Damon’s worldview, it changes in its application to Ely Houston’s identity, and it works upon the plot scheme as well as the characters. Other recurring themes in Wright’s works also undergo tropological revisions; the

dread Big Boy experiences as he watches whites lynch his friend in “Big Boy Leaves Home” corresponds to Bigger Thomas’s more anger-driven dread in Native Son. This latter form of dread transforms into Cross Damon’s existential dread, the concept of which Wright borrows from Kierkegaard. Wright’s narrative style, reflecting the notion of the speakerly text, often moves freely from dialogue to stream-of-consciousness to third person narrator. The Outsider also “talks” to other texts, particularly Wright’s own previous works. In rewriting the speakerly, Wright does not necessarily pay homage to specific works of African American literature, but he does honor the specifically black vernacular tradition of jazz through the names he bestows on his protagonist. Not only do the textual relations inherent in the figure of the Signifying Monkey provide a useful lens through which one may view the novel, but also Cross Damon surfaces as both Esu the trickster and the Signifying Monkey. In (re)creating himself, Cross attempts to uncover the various meanings of political and ideological belief systems and also turns to particularly black rhetorical strategies to assert his identity.

As mentioned above, the spatial distance from African American life that Wright experienced while living in Paris concerns scholars and readers who see an absence of the African American vernacular in Wright’s later works. Although, upon close examination, many aspects of The Outsider fit Gates’s theory of African American literature, the novel does not explicitly reflect blackness. That is, Wright’s protagonist possesses a more subtle form of African American identity. Cross Damon rejects the authority and belief system of the Christian church, particularly the religion to which his mother belongs. Cross also dislikes the idea of Black Nationalism and all ideologies that focus on racial or class identity. His casting off of religion and race-identity “made him instinctively choose to love himself over and against all others” (22). Cross possesses a strong sense of individuality and privileges self-reflection over

outside instruction as a means to better the self. There are aspects of the black community, though, that Cross finds relative to his worldview. The jazz tradition, which embodies the rebelliousness and subversive nature of an oppressed people, typifies his sense of being in the world and provides the model by which he (re)creates himself.

While Wright does not usually use jazz to construct his works as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin do, he recognizes jazz as a locus for rebellious African American discourse. In his essay “The Literature of the Negro in the United States,” which appears in White Man, Listen!, Wright differentiates between two sides of “black folk expression: The sacred and the secular” (750). Under the sacred heading, Wright places African American spirituals, in which “outright rebellion is couched in Biblical symbols” (751). Wright goes on to explain the phenomena of sacred folk expression and, in a statement that is consonant with the notion of double-consciousness, claims, “It was through the door of religion that the American Negro first walked into the house of Western culture, and it was through religious symbols that he has given voice to his most poignant yearnings” (752). The subversive black idiom established by these sacred forms of black expression manifests itself in the secular sphere of African American life. Among the secular expressions, Wright includes work songs, the blues, and the Dirty Dozens, which convey African American dissonance in irreverent and witty language. In the foreword to Paul Oliver’s Blues Fell This Morning, Wright calls the blues “starkly brutal, haunting folk songs,” composed “in a vocabulary terser than Basic English, shorn of all hyperbole, purged of metaphysical implications, wedded to a frankly atheistic vision of life, and excluding almost all references to nature and her various moods” (viii). Much of this description could apply to Wright’s own style of writing, particularly “starkly brutal,” “haunting,” and “frankly atheistic.” In fact, Wright’s “outright rebellion” is often “couched in Biblical symbols,” as apparent in his

presentation of Bigger Thomas as a Christ figure in Native Son or as evident in Cross Damon's name (something this study aims to elucidate more fully). Ultimately, Wright's interest in the blues and in jazz, and his recognition of the subversive and defiant nature of these forms of expression locates The Outsider within the context of African American discourse that Gates describes in The Signifying Monkey.

Gates's theory of Esu and the Signifying Monkey also comes to bear on the rhetorical traditions within these secular expressions. The creators of the blues, jazz, and the Dirty Dozens are, in essence, tricksters who manipulate white discourse in rebellious acts of creation. The improvisation crucial to the jazz tradition, the lonely wailing of a blues singer, the verbal dexterity necessary to perform the Dirty Dozens, and the homage each one of these expressions pays to preceding forms of secular black folk discourse reflect qualities inherent in the figure of the Signifying Monkey. It is in this sense that Cross Damon is the Signifying Monkey, who, according to Keith Gilyard, is "the most intellectually and most verbally gifted of all Wright's characters, is never at a loss for words, and he can consciously manipulate sociolinguistic situations to gain advantage" (159). One of these situations, recognized by many scholars as one of the most significant acts of masking Cross performs, is the scene in which Cross dupes two white men in the Newark City Hall.⁸ Before adopting his trickster guise, Cross contemplates his plan of action to secure the birth certificate of a recently deceased man:

He reflected intensely, calling upon his knowledge of white and black race relations to stand him in good stead. If ever he could act convincingly the role of a subservient Negro, this was the time. He would have to present to the officials an appearance of a Negro so scared and ignorant that any white American acting

out the normal content of his racial consciousness would never dream that he was up to anything deceptive. (214)

In this scene, the importance of Cross's double-consciousness emerges, for he could not have been successful without being a product of both Western and black communities. To fool the records clerks, Cross mimics black speech and feigns total stupidity. He also realizes that his blackness, his outsider-ness, gives him an advantage in that "each white man he would encounter... would project out upon him his own conception of the Negro and he could safely hide behind it" (217). Jeffery Atteberry claims that "the new identity that Cross desires to craft, if it is to be believed by others, must adhere to the highly racialized codes of behavior that are enforced by society" (887). As an Esu-like figure, Cross can read into and reinterpret "racialized codes of behavior" in order to suit his purposes. Like the slaves who sang subversive spirituals and the African Americans who voice their dissonance in the Dirty Dozens, Cross turns to specifically African American rhetorical strategies to craft identities that permit him to move about in the modern world.

The rhetorical strategies of the Signifying Monkey also surface in Wright's use of the Dirty Dozens in his works. Wright's awareness of the Dirty Dozens and their implications in African American culture surfaces in the first story of Uncle Tom's Children and finds its way into Native Son and into The Outsider. "Big Boy Leaves Home" begins with a particularly vulgar example of the Dirty Dozens, which, when viewed from a psychological perspective, resonates with many of Wright's Freudian themes. A group of four boys—the group of four males being another recurring theme in Wright's texts—alternate singing the following lines:

Yo mama don wear no drawers...

Ah seena when she pulled em off...

N she washed 'em in alcohol...

N she hung 'em out in the hall...

The boys attempt to come up with another rhyme to extend the song, and Big Boy makes up a word, “*Quall*,” which the other boys find humorous but useless. Big Boy, however, ends the song with “*N then she put em back on her QUALL!*” The boys follow this irreverent verbal play with an African American spiritual, “Dis train boun fo Glory,” as the story continues. In performing the Dirty Dozens and singing the spiritual, the group of boys engages in speech acts that epitomize and unite the people in their community. Moreover, Big Boy exhibits the improvisational quality of the Dirty Dozens, signaling the importance of his character in the story and his awareness of the ambiguity of language. Big Boy is the Signifying Monkey, performing an act of revision upon the song and making it even cruder than before.

Wright finds the Dirty Dozens one of the most dissident forms of the secular black folk expressions. In “The Literature of the Negro in the United States,” he claims that “out of the folk songs of the migrant Negro there has come one form of Negro folklore that makes even Negroes blush a little among themselves when it is mentioned” (755). Wright understands the Dirty Dozens as a reaction to oppression. In an attempt to invalidate feelings of inferiority in the white patriarchal United States, African American men and women reject what the dominant culture considers “decent, holy, just, wise, straight, right, and uplifting” (755). They reject these things through expressions like the Dirty Dozens, which then become an outlet for their anger and aggression. Through a tropological revision, Wright transforms the Dirty Dozens song Big Boy and his friends sing into a scene in Native Son, in which Bigger and his friends “play white.” The dialogue follows a moment when Bigger expresses his wish to fly a plane even though he is prohibited by the United States government to do so. In this scene, the boys pretend they are

military officials, businessmen, and politicians. Acting as if they are the President and his Secretary of State, Bigger and his friend Gus exchange the following dialogue:

“This is the President of the United States speaking,” Bigger said.

“Oh, yessuh, Mr. President,” Gus said.

“I’m calling a cabinet meeting this afternoon at four o’clock and you, as Secretary of State, *must* be there.”

Well, now, Mr. President,” Gus said, “I’m pretty busy. They raising sand over there in Germany and I got to send ’em a note....”

“But this is important,” Bigger said.

“What you going to take up at this cabinet meeting?” Gus asked.

“Well, you see, niggers is raising sand all over the country,” Bigger said, struggling to keep back his laughter. “We’ve got to do something with these black folks....”

“Oh, if it’s about the niggers, I’ll be right there, Mr. President,” Gus said.

They hung up imaginary receivers and leaned against the wall and laughed. A street car rattled by. Bigger sighed and swore.

“Goddammit!”

“What’s the matter?”

“They don’t let us do *nothing*.” (19)

This improvisational and derisive transaction between Bigger and Gus allows them to locate the source of their frustration and playfully attack that source without experiencing repercussions for their rebelliousness. They adopt the role of tricksters, masking as powerful white men and verbally playing with the racist ideology that oppresses them. Although Bigger and his friends

are not as erudite as Cross Damon, they, like Cross, possess double-consciousnesses that allow them to view their situation with outsider perspectives. Wright's attention to the nuances of black identity and the ways in which African Americans communicate race-specific messages within their community reemerges in his revision of the Dirty Dozens trope in The Outsider.

The traditional themes and black vernacular of the Dirty Dozens find their way into Wright's third novel, transforming into a mode of expression that derides not only racism in the United States but also Western imperialism in "Third World" countries. While sitting at a South Side Chicago lunch stand, Cross overhears "a crowd of working class Negroes" talking about extraterrestrials and government conspiracies. In Wright's discussion of the Dirty Dozens in "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," he emphasizes that fact that those who use the Dirty Dozens are usually lower-class African Americans, whom he calls "a vast mass of semi-literate people living amidst the most complex, the most highly industrialized, nation on earth" (755). Existing in such a contradictory state, these African Americans, like Bigger Thomas and his friends, reject and disparage the values and conditions from which racism excludes them. The conversation Cross hears in the diner reflects these African Americans' dissatisfaction with their status in the United States. As one man discusses flying saucers and Martians around an eagerly attentive group, the narrator notes that "their attitude was one of laughing skepticism underscored with seriousness" (33). This description could apply as easily to the blues and jazz as it does to the Dirty Dozens. The man acting as story teller goes on to claim that white people are scared of what they have found in the flying saucers, and he proclaims his reasoning:

"THEM LITTLE MEN THE WHITE FOLKS FOUND IN THEM SAUCERS WAS COLORED MEN AND THEY WAS FROM MARS!" the tall man spoke in deep solemn tones. "That's why they hushed up the story. They didn't want the

world to know that the rest of the universe is colored! Most of the folks on this earth is colored, and if the white folks knew that the other worlds was full of colored folks who wanted to come down here, what the hell chance would the white folks have?” (34)

This playful banter is much more sophisticated than Big Boy’s wordplay or than Bigger Thomas’s performance. Wright gives his characters sharper insight into world politics; a coming-of-age has taken place within the black community in The Outsider that allows its members to identify with other oppressed peoples. As everyone at the lunch stand, including Cross, laughs hysterically at the joke, Cross thinks to himself, “Were there not somewhere in this world rebels with whom he could feel at home, men who were outsiders not because they had been born black and poor, but because they had thought their way through the many veils of illusion?” (35). The connection between particularly black forms of discourse and Cross’s status as an outsider is blatantly clear in this scene. Wright demonstrates how the African American vernacular affects the black intellectual’s ontological identity, and he positions Cross as an interpreter of this particularly African American discourse. Cross, however, does not cling to this vernacular for its comforting sense of racial identity; rather, he relies on it to facilitate his personal (re)creation.

The elements of secular black folk expression that Wright, as well as Cross, finds most engaging are the blues and jazz. In the foreword to Blues Fell This Morning, Wright calls the blues “lusty, lyrical realism charged with taut sensibility” (ix). For Wright, the blues are the artistic, political, and emotional outlets for the dispossessed; they were created by desperate people searching for meaning in their lives. Because of their origins, other outsiders relate to their message. Wright claims that “in Buenos Aires, Stockholm, Copenhagen, London, Berlin,

Paris, Rome, in fact, in every large city of earth where lonely, disinherited men congregate for pleasure or amusement, the orgiastic wail of the blues, and their strident offspring, jazz, can be heard” (viii). Just as Cross’s double-consciousness and outsider-ness typifies the condition of all people in the modern world, the blues and jazz act as the fitting expressions of all modern men and women. As John McCluskey states, “Blue-jazz is a statement of rejection, a knell for those who are outsiders and who despair” (336). In this way, Wright lifts the cultural boundaries set in place when the blues appear solely as black phenomena and offers them to the world as more universal loci of expression. Wright recognizes and celebrates the blues origins of jazz, and he also wishes to integrate the spirit of jazz into his concept of the modern hybrid identity.

Although Wright does not make many implicit references to jazz in his fiction, he showed a strong interest in jazz while living in New York and in Paris. McCluskey maintains that “despite the fact that the novel [The Outsider] seems a soliloquy on Wright’s belief in a thoroughly secular sensibility, the comments on blue-jazz are important and consistent with those views developed by Wright in his last years” (336). Fabre’s biography records Wright’s interaction with blues and jazz musicians in New York and in Paris. In the early 1940s, Wright composed “King Joe,” a blues poem celebrating the famous boxer Joe Louis, which Paul Robeson and Count Basie recorded. Wright collaborated with Langston Hughes on “Red Clay Blues” and continued to write blues poems later in his life (Unfinished 237-8). Wright also wrote liner notes for Barclay, a large Parisian record company, for which he composed the notes to Louis Jordan’s record “Les Rois du Caf’ Conc” and to an album by Quincy Jones (Fabre 516). Fabre claims that Wright “took the work seriously” and was inspired to explore jazz and blues in his own writing (516). Margaret Walker, prolific poet, literary critic, and close friend of Wright, refers to him as being a “jazz critic” toward the end of his life (306). Walker also recalls

Wright's love of music, "all kinds of black music—jazz, blues, gospels, and spirituals—especially on records" (313). She says that Wright once brought her to the house of Frank Marshall Davis, poet and jazz historian, "to hear some of his great collection of recorded jazz" (313). Wright's interest in jazz is a product of his attraction to all forms of African American vernacular expressions, and he subtly infuses Cross's quick decisions and deep meditations with a deep fascination with jazz.

Improvisation finds its way into The Outsider as one of the most important aspects of jazz. Gates classifies improvisation as a "practice of intertextuality," or as an act of homage to preceding texts and a tropological revision—a trope repeated with changes and differences (63-4). Both Wright and Cross engage in adaptation and revision when they allude to Western philosophies but alter those philosophies to fit their worldviews, and Cross is always ready to improvise his identity in order to fool others to get what he needs. According to JanMohamed, the improvisational nature of jazz corresponds to the ideas expressed by the French existentialists. He claims, "To the extent that jazz improvisation thrives on a circumstance-based freedom, it transforms contingency into necessity....Wright's dependence on 'coincidences' constitutes not a failure of some putative realism but, rather, a liberal and highly effective deployment of an improvisational style" (191). JanMohamed's observation helps to explain the problem that some critics have with the plot structure of the novel—they do not pick up on the verbal clues and tropes that locate The Outsider within the African American vernacular.⁹ Improvisation, like the theme of double-consciousness in the novel, acts as a model both for the structure of the plot and for Cross's individuality. Throughout the novel, Cross must improvise to conceal his real identity from new acquaintances or to preserve his existence, and the fast pace of the novel, which consistently places Cross in precarious situations, requires that he act

quickly. One may even conceive of The Outsider as Wright's re-hatching of another murder-based novel, revising Native Son with improvisational plot turns and new characterization. As the Signifying Monkey who must trick those around him, Cross also takes part in improvisational naming, bestowing on himself names that reflect his hybrid identity.

The improvisation Cross learns and mimics from the jazz tradition is crucial to his search for freedom as an outsider. In The Jazz Trope, Alfonso W. Hawkins, Jr., claims that "jazz is the creative attempt to exceed boundaries through the art of improvisation. Its power lies in the individualized *cloaking* action of an animated response to a set of values that challenge invention and freedom" (xvi). For Hawkins, improvisation cannot exist without boundaries, for boundaries and limits are what imbue improvisational actions with meaning. Cross's changing identities and his acts of violence cannot make sense or serve a purpose unless they occur within some sort of cultural or societal context. For instance, Cross's ability to mask as the ignorant black man in order to secure a birth certificate could not have been effective had racist ideology not infected the psyches of the City Hall clerks whom he dupes. Ely Houston, Cross's antagonist, recognizes this phenomenon and uses it to punish Cross toward the end of the novel. Houston knows Cross has committed murders but he does not have the concrete evidence to prove him guilty; instead, he tells Cross that he will not recognize his crimes because Cross has excluded himself from the rest of society. Realizing what Houston's retribution entails, Cross thinks to himself, "He was not to be punished! Men would not give meaning to what he had done! Society would not even look at it, recognize it! That was not fair, wasn't right, just..." (573). Cross's actions only make sense within the limits of the Western society in which he lives. He can trick others within that society because they accept its boundaries. In taking on "acceptable" identities, Cross allows others to validate his existence. He realizes this at the end of the novel when he states, "Alone a

man is nothing..." (585). Like Conrad's Kurtz, Cross claims his lone quest for meaning is "horrible" (586). There must be boundaries and limits by which one can assert an existence, and those limits are the boundaries of community.

Even though Cross attempts to reject all social, cultural, political, and philosophical ideologies, he turns to those systems to create identities that others will recognize and accept. His ability to play the Signifying Monkey is dependent on his Esu-like ability to interpret belief systems. Cross can play the trickster because he possesses a double-consciousness, which allows him to see his society and his life from the outside. As he moves through the novel's world, adopting identities that allow him to survive in Western communities, he instinctually turns to the jazz tradition as a locus of ontological meaning through the names he adopts. Cross's reliance on the African American vernacular as a source of identity reflects Wright's conception of modernity as a mixture of Western and non-Western discourses. Although Cross's biggest ideological enemy is not racism, race, as it has affected American and global socioeconomics, is a powerful cultural construct. By turning to the black vernacular tradition and to its manifestation in jazz, Wright translates his experience of oppression into a broader anti-imperialist stance. Cross Damon represents the ability of the black intellectual to be both of the West and against the West while still maintaining his or her culturally specific modes of expression.

End Notes

⁶ While Gates's theory of the Signifying Monkey is very useful in elucidating the ideas in this study of The Outsider, it is certainly not the only theory or approach one may use in explaining Wright's use of the black vernacular in the novel. I am indebted to Gates's theory, but I do not intend this study to be a Gatesian reading of The Outsider.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of the concept of race and of racism in the novel, see Demirtürk.

⁸ For a discussion on the birth certificate office scene and the implications it has within the novel's racial sub-plot, see Demirtürk 285-6.

⁹ Henderson also claims that jazz “provides a background to the action of the novel” (395).

Chapter Three:
Rhythmic Flauntings

Wright's improvisational style in The Outsider emerges most clearly in the names Cross Damon assumes and in Cross Damon's impulsive acts of violence. In these two elements, the African American vernacular appears as a significant mode of self-expression. Hawkins notes that, along with "*signification*," "*masking or cloaking*," and "*adaptation*," "*inversion-conversion*, an indirect or direct intertextual and contextual adoption of another self, ridding oneself of tradition and place that suppress the spirit of freedom," is a particularly important element of the jazz trope (xvi). According to Hawkins, the most important feature of the inversion-conversion scheme is "*naming or nommo*, self-definition, and self-identification" (xvii). As Cross takes on new identities and assumes new names, he engages in the act of naming and self-identification. Not only does he reflect an element of the jazz tradition in his acts of naming, but also the names he adopts embody the jazz tradition and the notion of double-consciousness. Cross's violent actions also surface as moments of naming in which Cross "names" particular people and ideologies as unacceptable and disposable. By casting off some names in favor of other ones and by eliminating people who stand in his way, Cross attempts to liberate himself from the "tradition and place that suppress the spirit of freedom." He (re)creates himself according to the model of African American vernacular as expressed through jazz.

Wright's choice of names in The Outsider reflects his interest in names and in naming in his other works. As Kimberly W. Benston points out, Wright expresses his anxiety over the origins of his own name in Black Boy (6). This attention toward the significance of names and of naming appears in the names he gives his fictional characters. Gates considers naming "a

metaphor for black intertextuality,” which “is concerned with repetition and difference” (55). Wright frequently picks meaningful names and often reuses or modifies names from his previous works. The name “Big Boy” in “Big Boy Leaves Home” suggests both the character’s rotundity and the irony of his existence. Big Boy, although physically big, is just a child. “Big Boy” transforms into “Bigger Thomas” in Native Son, which indicates that the southern boy who has migrated to the North is now approaching manhood. In another of Wright’s ironic twists, “Bigger Thomas” is also a play on “Uncle Tom,” the stereotypically subservient black man; Bigger, though, is not the lovable, docile African American whom whites mock and pity. The name “Big Boy” also appears in The Outsider. In the opening scene of the novel, Cross’s friend Joe Thomas tells him, “We can’t hold your hand, Big Boy. And you’re a big boy, you know” (10). The use of the name is again ironic, for Joe Thomas is much bigger, physically, than Cross and is a much better corollary to the Big Boy in “Big Boy Leaves Home.” Joe Thomas also falls victim to Cross’s impulsive violence, and this small insult seems to suggest that Cross is indeed not Big Boy or Bigger Thomas and that he will destroy anyone or anything who attempts to name him as such. Wright’s reference to his own texts suggests that he is building upon his own literary themes. By repeating or altering the names of his characters across his works, Wright establishes his own particular form of African American vernacular expression.

In addition to his intertextual use of names, Wright chooses names that resonate within the themes of his works. Many names in Native Son reflect the novel’s thematic concerns. In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” Wright claims that one of the inspirations for the novel’s protagonist was a man “whom the white folks called a ‘bad nigger’” (435). The name “Bigger” symbolizes, for Wright, all disaffected African Americans who resist the confines of racism and attempt to assert their humanity in the face of oppression. The name of the white family, the Daltons, for

whom Bigger works, also possesses an illustrative meaning. Seymour L. Gross points out that the name “Dalton” in Native Son may refer to John Dalton, the man who discovered and gave his name to Daltonism, or the condition of color-blindness (76). In the novel, Mr. Dalton claims that he respects and works for the betterment of African Americans, but he is one of the Chicago Black Belt’s biggest slumlords. Mrs. Dalton, his wife, is literally blind and fails to see Bigger kill her daughter even as she stands in the room as he does it. Mary Dalton is also blind to the discomfort she and her boyfriend cause Bigger as they force him to eat with them in a Black Belt restaurant. The Biblical reference in Mary’s name also figures Bigger’s crime as a product of his Oedipal desire to kill his mother, for, at many points in the novel, Christian imagery presents Bigger as a Christ figure. Bigger’s communist lawyer, an attorney for the International Labor Defense, is called Boris A. Max; his first name reflects the notion of Russian Bolshevism, and his last name is an allusion to Karl Marx. Bigger’s girlfriend, Bessie Mears, also bears a significant name. As Edward A. Watson claims, the name “Bessie” may refer to the blues singer Bessie Smith, who, like her counterpart in Native Son, fell victim to depression and alcoholism throughout her life (65). Wright’s acute attention to the meaning of names and to their impact on the artistic program of Native Son carries over into his naming in The Outsider.

While the name “Cross Damon” and the names Cross assumes as he (re)creates himself are the most important names in The Outsider, the names of other characters exemplify significant meanings and themes in the novel. “Eva Blount” contains a Biblical reference to Eve in the creation story in Genesis. While Cross does not kill Eva as Bigger kills Mary, he does sleep with Eva and, in the end, causes her suicide. In this sense, Eva Blount comes to represent the consequences of Cross’s oedipal desires.¹⁰ Eva and her husband’s last name, Blount, also contains a consonantal sound that frequently recurs in Wright’s works. The “bl” sound, existing

in such words as “blot,” “blow,” and “blood” echo in the terms “black” and “blues,” two very significant elements of Wright’s fiction¹¹ The name of Cross’s co-worker and friend, Joe Thomas, figures him as Doubting Thomas from the New Testament because he cannot believe that Cross actually survived the subway accident until he touches him. Bob and Sarah Hunter are constantly searching, or hunting, for ways to overcome racial oppression; Bob is also “hunted down” by the communists he refuses to obey. The name of the New York District Attorney, “Ely Houston,” could be a reference to the famous civil rights lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston, for Ely Houston is very interested in establishing equality among blacks and whites in the United States. “Herndon,” the name of Gil and Eva’s fascist landlord, is taken from the name Angelo Herndon, one of Wright’s acquaintances in the Communist Party (Griffiths). All of these names attest to Wright’s keen awareness of naming as a powerful tool in fiction-writing. Through names, Wright subtly imbues his works with several layers of meanings, and these layers of meaning are particularly significant in the names he bestows on his protagonist Cross Damon.

“Cross Damon” contains direct religious and philosophical references. Scholars have noted the straightforward meanings behind the name. Margolies maintains that “the name Cross Damon (Demon?) is itself a symbol of inverted Christianity” (137). Like Margolies, JanMohamed takes the name to mean “the devil on the cross” (186). Henderson also observes that “in terms of the religious symbolism suggested by his name, Cross Damon has become a kind of Anti-Christ—representing not love and brotherhood, but their opposites” (390). Fabre, as mentioned above, and Gilroy recognize the philosophical allusion in the name, linking “Damon” with Nietzsche’s nihilistic ideas. Most importantly “Cross Damon” represents the protagonist’s double-consciousness. Cross is a conflicted individual, torn between what others think of him—a penniless, black postal worker—and what he thinks of himself—a self-reflective

intellectual. He is both repelled by and attracted to African American culture, and he finds it difficult, even impossible, to completely reject that culture in favor of fully embracing a Western (or white) ethos. “Cross Damon” signifies the modern condition, for while people still cling to the cultural or ritualistic aspects of identity as embodied by religious, patriotic, or racial solidarity, they also live in industrialized societies in which commodities and resources hold more force than individual beliefs. It is in this conflicted state that the reader finds Wright’s protagonist and follows his struggle.

Cross’s first name conveys his background and indicates one side of his personal struggle. Frustrated with Cross’s defiance and indifference toward God and religion, Cross’s mother declares, “To think I named you Cross after the Cross of Jesus” (29). “Cross” evokes the religious elements particular to African American culture—African slaves and their descendents are drawn to the image of the crucifixion in that it mirrors the torture and humiliation of slavery and of slavery’s legacy in the form of Jim Crow laws and segregation. In terms of double-consciousness, “Cross” symbolizes the protagonist’s African American spirituality, something he desperately tries to cast off but cannot shed, even as he accepts the nihilistic meanings of his last name. Because it is his first name, “Cross” suggests that there is a certain level of intimacy between the African American tradition and him; in the black sphere, Cross is most at home, he knows his role, and he can easily adopt the black mask that suits his objectives. For instance, when applying for the birth certificate of Lionel Lane, Cross masks as the ignorant, bungling Uncle Tom in order to fool the white clerks into supplying him with the much-needed piece of paper. Even though Cross rejects Christianity, Christian beliefs, specifically those expounded within the black church community, shape his identity. In fact, Cross attributes his sense of dread, a dread that corresponds to Kierkegaard’s existentialist dread, to his experience with his

mother's religion (22-3). This dread that Cross feels, that pushes him to question the meaning of his existence, is essentially what places him at a crossroads between life and death.

Whereas "Cross" most certainly represents Christianity and depicts the protagonist as a Christ figure, Wright's choice of "Damon" rather than "Demon," as Margolies suggests, is a direct allusion to Nietzsche's philosophy. In The Gay Science, in which Nietzsche lays out his doctrine of eternal recurrence, he imagines a demon, in German "Dämon," who comes to tell a person that he or she must re-live his or her life from start to finish, with no changes. This prospect of eternal recurrence, continually reliving one's life, can be a blessing or a misfortune, depending on how the person has carried on his or her life (Nietzsche sec. 341). For Nietzsche, who influences a good deal of Wright's works, this demon is not inherently bad. If the reader is to interpret Cross Damon as Nietzsche's Dämon, then Cross's "demonic" side, which is in opposition with the Christianity of "Cross," does not necessarily symbolize the malice usually associated with the word "demon." The "Damon" of the protagonist's name, then, suggests that Wright intended Cross Damon, like Nietzsche's Dämon, to awaken readers to all the possibilities life offers. Cross Damon, as the existential hero grappling with the limits of his freedom, must contend with the boundaries that his background and race present to him while he knows that these boundaries are contrived. The tension between his first and last name is the fundamental conflict that drives him to seek out new identities and new paths in life. An icon of both Christianity and atheism, "Cross Damon" represents a key element of Wright's notion of modernity—double-consciousness.

"Damon" also evokes Ancient Greek paganism. According to Walter Burkert, the Ancient Greeks considered a daimon a minor god who acted as an envoy for the higher gods. Like the Yoruba trickster, Esu, a daimon represents the multiplicity of the gods and their

faculties. The Greeks believed that each person possesses a daimon that influences his or her actions and fate (Burkert 179-81). The image of Cross as a little god, a daimon, recurs throughout the novel from the Christian symbolism in Cross's name to his megalomaniacal violence against members of the communist party. In the opening scene, Cross's friends joke about a trick he used to play while working on the eleventh floor of the Post Office; the scene portrays Cross as the little trickster god, Esu, toying with people's points of view. Cross would throw his pocket change out of the window and watch as people would scramble to pick up the money and would "stand looking up to the window of the 11th floor with their mouths hanging open..." (6). One particular day, when two men knock each other out going after the money, "Cross said that that was the only time he ever felt like God" (6). Again, the contradiction inherent in his name—the tension intrinsic to his state of double-consciousness—surfaces as the locus of internal and external conflict. Cross's rejection of God, or gods, and of ideology spurs him to make himself into a god, to create a powerful and all-knowing self who can transcend the trappings of the modern world.

The three names Cross adopts as he leaves his past life in Chicago to (re)create himself in New York City all convey this sense of double-consciousness. The narrator consistently refers to the protagonist with his original name, Cross Damon, and ensures that the reader never loses sight of Cross's initial identity. Even as Cross masks as Charles Webb, Addison Jordan, and Lionel Lane, he is always his questioning and searching self. Since Cross Damon never really loses his name in the narrative, the third person limited narrator invites the reader to see Cross from within. The reader is privy to Cross's tricks and inner meditations. For the reader, Cross never actually becomes Charles Webb, Addison Jordan, or Lionel Lane; he just cloaks himself in those identities, improvising to invent counterfeit personalities and pasts. The theme of double-

consciousness not only describes Cross's personal conflicts, as apparent in the name "Cross Damon," but it also applies to his ability to simultaneously be Cross Damon and one of the personalities he creates to conceal his true identity. Cross's ability to mimic and to improvise reflects Wright's adherence to the jazz trope as a meaningful and compelling form of modern expression.

Cross excitedly adopts his first alias, Charles Webb, while sitting in a bar listening to "a demonical jazz music that linked itself with his sense of homelessness" (111). The narrator describes the effects of the music on Cross in more detail, and the passage reflects Cross's identification with the African American vernacular:

The strains of blue and sensual notes were akin to him [Cross] not only by virtue of their having been created by black men, but because they had come out of the hearts of men who had been rejected and yet who still lived and shared the lives of their rejectors. Those notes possessed the frightened ecstasy of the unrepentant and sent his feelings tumbling and coagulating in a mood of joyful abandonment.

(111)

Wright's choice of words—"the rejected," "their rejectors," "frightened ecstasy," "the unrepentant," "coagulating," and "joyful abandonment"—foreshadows the moments of violence and the subversive actions Cross experiences later in the novel. The narrator's imaginative account of the music as indicative of the African American experience also sets this passage apart from the more action-driven plotline of the novel. As Cross begins to formulate the identity of Charles Webb, he thinks to himself, "To begin his new life he would relive something he knew well, something that would not tax too greatly his inventive powers" (111). He decides that, as Charles Webb, he will pretend to be a black man from Memphis, Tennessee, who "had

come up fresh from the Deep South looking for work” (111). Cross bases Charles Webb on a story specific to the African American experience in the United States; by evoking this familiar life story, one that “he knew well,” Cross demonstrates his ability to reinterpret a recurring theme in black life and in black literature. His understanding of the African American experience and of the ways in which jazz embodies that experience attests to his identification with the African American side of his double-consciousness. By introducing Cross’s first false identity with an insightful description of jazz, Wright signals the course of his protagonist’s rebellious nature and establishes the standard by which the reader interprets the following name changes and subversive scenes in the novel.

Moreover, the name Cross picks reflects the overwhelming influence of jazz as a source of meaning and purpose for Wright and for his protagonist. “Charles Webb” is a variation on “Chick Webb,” the name of a famous jazz drummer who led a popular big band in Harlem in the 1930s. Burt Korall claims that Chick Webb was such an amazing drummer because “he made use of previously undiscovered or disregarded techniques, bringing into focus ways and means to make the instrument a telling source of strength and graphic comment” (8). Chick Webb’s style most certainly echoed “the frightened ecstasy of the unrepentant” that Cross senses in jazz music; Korall describes his recordings as possessing “a thundering, enveloping quality” (29). Like Cross’s Charles Webb, Chick Webb made the South-to-North migration from Baltimore to New York City in the mid-1920s and began playing with other musicians in Harlem. Chick Webb was a man of small stature and, similar to Wright’s Ely Houston, had a hunchback because of a childhood accident; Webb’s struggle with chronic pain and several illnesses, in addition to the predicament of being a black man in the 1930s United States, strengthened his character and

motivated him to succeed (Korall 11, 25). Wright's choice of "Charles Webb" pays homage to this illustrious jazz figure and reveals the cultural fusion intrinsic to Cross Damon's identity.

As Charles Webb, Cross performs his most surprising and distressing act of violence. Having taken up in a seedy hotel under the name "Charles Webb," Cross runs into his friend and co-worker Joe Thomas. Joe, assuming that Cross has died in a subway accident and having attended Cross's funeral that same day, does not believe his eyes. In a moment redolent of the Biblical story of Doubting Thomas in the Gospel of John, Joe "threw out his hands, hesitated, then clapped both of them on Cross's shoulders. 'I got to *touch* you to believe it!'" Joe exclaims (133). Fearing Joe will reveal that he is not dead, Cross knocks Joe out with an empty whiskey bottle and flings him out of the window to his death. This scene establishes Cross as an Anti-Christ figure and reveals that, in the new life he will attempt to create, violence will become an essential mode of expression. The artistic merit of this scene lies in its relation to the killing of Bessie in Native Son. There is the overt presence of the cold—"Joe was frozen," and "a blast of freezing air turned his [Cross's] breath to steam" (136). There is also the injury to the head, which mirrors Bigger's smashing of Bessie's head with the awkward brick. Wright includes one of his favorite devices, animal imagery: "Cross moved now with the speed of a panther" (136). Even the disposal of the body out of the window into the cold echoes Bigger's disposal of Bessie down a cold air shaft. This violent scene is most distressing because of its similarity to the killing of Bessie in Native Son. While Bigger Thomas acts irrationally, killing Bessie in his struggle to survive, the reader expects more compassion out of Cross, a thoughtful intellectual. The killing of Joe Thomas sets the mood for Cross's further descent into violence. As Charles Webb, Cross drums his way into a cycle of destruction, and he takes on "the frightened ecstasy of the unrepentant."

The second alias Cross assumes is Addison Jordan. As Addison Jordan, Cross does not perform any act of violence. He lies about his identity, runs out on a needy woman, and meets his end, but there is no real malice associated with this name. The name Addison comes from the Old English and means the son of Adam (OED). Like “Dalton” in Native Son, “Addison” also refers to a medical condition; Addison’s disease, or Addison's anæmia, is a serious form of anæmia that causes the skin to turn brown (OED). As Addison Jordan, Cross makes his closest connections to other African Americans. He meets and stands up for Bob Hunter on the train to New York City. He rents a room from Hattie, a lonely widow, and tries to prevent con-artists from taking advantage of her. He also rooms in the house of an old woman whose piety and religiousness echoes that of his mother. “Addison Jordan” certainly contains religious symbolism, and, for Cross, represents many facets of African American life.

Biblical references, like those in “Addison,” are even stronger in “Jordan,” reinforcing the “Cross” of the protagonist’s name. “Jordan” is a reference to the Book of Exodus, which, like the crucifixion, resonates with members of the African Diaspora. It is in Exodus that Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery, and this story is often repeated in African American spirituals, such as “Go Down Moses,” as analogous to the enslavement of Africans in the United States. The subway accident, in a sense, has freed Cross from the slavery of his life in Chicago, and he makes an exodus to New York City. The River Jordan is also the site of the first Christian baptisms and where John the Baptist performs Jesus’s baptism. The name “Jordan” further depicts Cross as an Anti-Christ figure and suggests that his exit from the womb-like wreckage of the subway and his journey to New York City are stages of rebirth. Water also plays a role in the train scene that brings him into contact with Bob Hunter, a black man from the Caribbean, and with Ely Houston. Hunter spills hot coffee on a white woman passenger, and she grabs a silver

water pitcher with which to hit him. Cross swiftly comes between the two, solidifying a new friendship with Hunter and attracting the attention of a Catholic priest who rushes to protect the woman (157-8). As the Anti-Christ, Cross prevents the woman from “baptizing” Hunter with the water pitcher. He acts as the little god, interpreting and subverting racial codes to prevent the woman’s hate crime. After this incident on the train, Cross assumes the name “Addison Jordan” and begins to take on a god-like persona.

Similar to Cross’s alias “Charles Webb,” “Jordan” may also be an allusion to the jazz tradition, referring to the musician Louis Jordan. According to David Ake, Louis Jordan refined his musical talent while he was a member of Chick Webb’s big band. There may have been some tension between Jordan and Webb, driving Jordan to leave the group and start his own successful band in the late 1930s. The connection between Chick Webb and Louis Jordan makes a strong case for why Wright chose those particular names for his protagonist to adopt. While paying homage to these jazz musicians, Wright is also showing how, like Chick Webb and Louis Jordan, Cross is a leader who always wants to be in control. As mentioned above, Wright also composed liner notes for one of Louis Jordan’s albums and was very familiar with his musical style. Wright may have appreciated the fact that Louis Jordan’s band became “one of the very few African-American bands of the time to ‘cross over’ to white audiences” (Ake 46). Despite Louis Jordan’s popularity, Ake maintains that his “sound and subject matter remained deeply rooted in African American forms and styles” and that he “maintained a strong connection to the blues and an insistent, eminently danceable beat” (47). Louis Jordan’s light-hearted style separates him from other, “more serious” musicians, such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. In his bop songs, Jordan often sang of life in the South and sometimes put on a minstrel-like show (Ake 55). Although he is not often considered one of the great jazz

musicians, Louis Jordan had a major influence on his musical successors. Cross's choice of the name "Addison Jordan," with its references to religion and to jazz, reveals his desire to be part of the African American community even as he attempts to (re)create himself outside of that community.

Other than the people he meets on the train, there is only one person in New York City who knows Cross as Addison Jordan. The landlady, Hattie, whom Cross turns to at the end of the novel, becomes a symbol of black women's pain and also reflects Wright's interest in the subversive nature of jazz. Cross's interaction with Hattie produces another meditation on jazz, similar to the one that precedes his adoption of the name Charles Webb. Again, Cross links jazz with outsider-ness:

Most of the time he could hear her [Hattie] playing blues or jazz records whose wild rhythms wailed up to him through the thin flooring. His morbid mood was susceptible to the lonely melodies and, as he tapped his feet to the beat of the tunes, his sense of estrangement became accentuated and he felt more inclined than ever to avoid contact with reality. (178)

When he hears jazz, Cross seems to lose control and slip into apprehensive, or tormented, states. Jazz becomes the realm of his desires and fears and represents the loneliness of modern men and women. Cross thinks of jazz as "his only emotional home now" and as the "rhythmic flauntings of guilty feelings, the syncopated outpourings of frightened joy existing in guises forbidden and despised by others" (178). Wright invests this description with more racial tones as the meditation becomes similar to his description of the Dirty Dozens in "The Literature of the Negro in the United States":

He sensed how Negroes had been made to live in but not of the land of their birth, how the injunctions of an alien Christianity and the strictures of white laws had evoked in them the very longings and desires that that religion and law had been designed to stifle. (178)

Like the Dirty Dozens which celebrate the amoral and the taboo, jazz also becomes a way to express the tensions and contradictions of double-consciousness. Jazz is the music of modernity, holding together the ambiguities of race and of identity in its improvisational style. Jazz also reflects Cross's personal and psychological conflicts:

He realized that this blue-jazz was a rebel art blooming seditiously under the condemnations of a Protestant ethic just like his own consciousness had sprung conditioned to defiance from his relationship to his mother who had shrilly evoked in him exactly what she so desperately tried to smother, had posited in him that which she loathed above all in the world by bringing it too insistently to his attention. (178)

Within jazz, Cross hears the spirit of rebellion and of violence. The improvisational style of jazz, the ability of the jazz performer to make rhythms anew and to alter those rhythms in a constant state of revision, becomes, for Cross, a musical manifestation of the trickster's abilities. Esu knows the rules and can also bend them for a desired effect. Cross observes this in his conception of jazz:

Blue-jazz was the scornful gesture of men turned ecstatic in their state of rejection; it was the musical language of the satisfiedly amoral, the boastings of the contentedly lawless, the recreations of the innocently criminal.... (178)

The oxymoronic nature of the blues, and of their cousin jazz, brings to light the duplicity of existence associated with Esu and with double-consciousness. As Ralph Ellison claims in “Richard Wright’s Blues,” a blues “ evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound” (265). It is this oxymoronic, the “innocently criminal,” state of mind that allows Cross to reject all ties to his past life and to commit murder. In fact, the heightened state of awareness that overcomes him while he is listening to jazz is very similar to his frame of mind in the murder scenes. A feeling of power and of invincibility engulfs him, transforming the trickster into a higher god capable of taking life. Cross, as Addison Jordan, is the inventive jazz musician, overwhelmed by his creative abilities and entrenched in African American history and culture.

There are two high points, or illuminative moments, that coincide with the alias “Addison Jordan.” One is Cross’s interaction with the other “outsider” in the novel, the hunchback District Attorney Ely Houston. The other moment is the fatal wounding of Cross at the end of the novel. These two moments are perhaps the most definitive occurrences in Cross’s life—in the first, he makes a genuine connection with another human being and, in the second, he loses his will, or more explicitly his ability, to survive. The mental and the physical implications of both moments are linked to the meaning of “Addison Jordan” in both a literary and spiritual sense.

At the beginning of Book Two: Dream, Cross meets the New York District Attorney Ely Houston, and they enter into a philosophical discussion on the human condition. Cross, having just murdered Joe and fled Chicago, is worried that Houston may see his guilt. The narrator illustrates Cross’s anxiety:

Cross could feel that Houston sensed the quality of the demonical in him, and he could feel the same in Houston. But this man, of all men, must not get too close

to him. He represented the law and the law condemned what he was and what he had done. Cross felt the hot breath of danger as Houston continued. (170)

Houston does not see “the quality of the demonical in him” at first. In fact, he views Cross as Addison Jordan—a deeply intellectual, almost spiritual man, who can cross the color line, the River Jordan, that often separates Houston from other African Americans. Houston tells Cross, “You know...I’ve never had a chance to talk to Negroes like I’d like to” (168). Cross offers Houston this chance, and the existential maxim that Cross imparts to Houston—“Maybe man is nothing in particular” (172)—reverberates throughout the novel. The bond Wright establishes between Cross and Houston prefigures the novel’s ending; however, “the hot breath of danger” Cross associated with Houston in this scene actually originates from another, more sinister, source.

At the end of the novel, Houston denies Cross punishment for his crimes and leaves him to once again redefine himself. As Cross attempts to leave his failed situation, two members of the Communist Party follow him. The Party seeks to exact revenge on Cross for the murders of two of its leaders. When he realizes he is in danger, Cross calls an acquaintance from his first days in New York, Hattie in Harlem. Once again he assumes the name Addison Jordan in order to find shelter from his enemies, but he cannot escape quickly enough and is shot. Wright infuses this scene with a strong sense of immediacy, and the narrative voice quickens to catch the moment in which the bullet enters Cross’s body. There are several phrases that suggest the spontaneity of Cross’s fall: “a snapping sound,” “a shower of something like loose gravel,” “a searing streak of fire,” “a loud, sharp report,” and “a jumping pulsing pain” (581-2). The repetition of the “s” sound also echoes both the release of the bullet and the s’s in Addison and in Cross. Although Cross takes on the name Addison Jordan right before he is shot, his murderers

attack him for what he has done under the name Lionel Lane. Perhaps if Cross had continued to be Addison Jordan, a man deeply aware of and accepting of his cultural background, he would not have fallen prey to power-hungry men.

Cross's third and most enduring alias is "Lionel Lane," a name Cross lifts from a snow-covered headstone in an African American cemetery outside New York City. Cross as Lionel Lane performs his most violent acts and causes Eva's dramatic suicide. The reader associates the name Lionel Lane with death as soon as Cross assumes it. While searching for the name, Cross practically freezes to death in the cemetery. The image of coldness and snow so prevalent in all of Wright's works emerges strongly in this scene. The cemetery is "veiled by demonic snowflakes dancing crazily in the winter wind," and the narrator claims that "snow was heaping up on the crown of his hat and his feet ached with cold" and that "he stood, breathing gusts of vapor into the snowflakes that flitted about his face and clogged his eyelids at times" (205-6). These images certainly suggest something wrong with the name Cross finds in the cemetery, for, in his searching, the ever-intrusive snow almost leaves him crippled and blind.

By searching for a name among the dead, Cross takes part in the act of paying homage to his forebears. Before finding "Lionel Lane," Cross encounters other "abandoned names"—Mary Hawkins, Maybelle Smith, Bessie Roundtree, James Holiday, and Neil Brown. Two of the names echo the murdered characters in Native Son; "Mary Hawkins" sounds a good deal like "Mary Dalton," and "Bessie Roundtree" could be Bigger's dead girlfriend. The symbolic snow and these names "speak" to Native Son and illustrate Wright's penchant for subtle detail. Wright also signals Lionel Lane as an anti-Christ in the inscription upon his tombstone and in Cross's reaction to the inscription:

He scraped the clinging snowflakes from the headboard and read the rest of the inscription:

Sleeping secure in the Faith of the Second Coming of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen...

Awkwardly Cross took out his pen and ripped off a bit of paper from his notebook and copied down the name and date; he hesitated at the expression of sentiment regarding Jesus' second coming; but, what the hell, take it down; it couldn't do any harm. (207)

This passage, in fact, signals to the reader that, as Lionel Lane, Cross will do much harm, and the themes of death and destruction established in this scene foretell the subsequent acts of violence associated with "Lionel Lane."

The name "Lionel Lane" is more elusive and can suggest a number of meanings. It may pay homage to Lionel Hampton, the famous jazz musician from Chicago. Like Chick Webb and Louis Jordan, Lionel Hampton was a vibraphonist and the leader of a popular band which toured abroad, visiting and performing in Britain and Europe (Feather 242). Wright may have chosen "Lionel" to celebrate this jazz musician and to illustrate Cross's desire to be like a band leader, a little god who can manipulate cords and create new forms through improvisation.

"Lionel" also resonates with another, more literarily significant character. In Arthurian legend, Sir Lionel (or Lyonell) is the son of King Bors of Gaul and the nephew of Sir Lancelot. According to Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur, Sir Lionel's brother Sir Bors abandoned rescuing Lionel from two evil knights in order to save a young virgin. Lionel swears revenge on his brother. While Lionel is attempting to fight Sir Bors, a hermit and Sir Colgrevice happen upon the scene. Sir Lionel ends up killing both these men, and, when he tries to kill Bors, God

intervenes with a ball of fire (477-9). This story bears strong resemblances to one of Cross's violent moments in both action and imagery. Although there is no real evidence that Wright chose this name based on its literary and historical counterparts, Cross's actions as Lionel Lane reflect some of the same issues associated with Sir Lionel.

The first destructive act Lionel Lane performs is a double murder. Much like Sir Lionel in Arthurian legend, Cross kills two men without much forethought or remorse. Happening upon a bloody conflict between Gil Blount, a Communist, and Herndon, a Fascist, Cross picks up the closest weapon, a broken table leg, and kills them both. Fabre notes that this violent scene mirrors other acts of violence in Wright's works (World 122-7). The use of fire and shadows echoes the image of the furnace cremating Mary in Native Son. While Cross is clearing the traces of his presence at the murder scene, "the winking shadows of the fire flicked warningly through the room" (305). Cross also uses a large inanimate object, much like the brick Bigger used to kill Bessie, to inflict fatal head wounds on his victims. The scene is memorable because of Wright's graphic detail:

Herndon fell like an ox and lay still. He had no doubt crushed the man's skull. Tense, he stood looking down at Herndon, waiting to see if he would move again. He was concentrated, aware of nothing but Herndon's still bloody form. Then he was startled; he whirled to see Gil struggling heavily to his feet, blood streaming from his face and neck, clotting his eyes. Cross stared for a moment. He was not through. The imperious feeling that had impelled him to action was not fulfilled. His eyes were unblinkingly on Gil's face. Yes, this other insect has to be crushed, blotted out of existence.... (303)

The demonical side of Cross comes out in full force in this passage. Wright's unflinching description of the scene, the raw brutality of both Cross's actions and thoughts, and the prevalence of blood attest to Wright's fascination with the power of violence. Although Cross feels "trapped in the coils of his own doings" after he kills Gil and Herndon, his will to kill uncovers his existential freedom.

Cross's fourth and final killing in the novel is more premeditated than the first three. Whereas Cross killed Joe Thomas to conceal his identity and murdered both Gil and Herndon as an impulsive attempt to erase political ideologies, Cross kills Jack Hilton out of revenge. After communist leader Jack Hilton alerts Customs Officials to Bob Hunter's illegal residency, Cross feels he must stand up for his friend against the oppressive power of the communist party. While waiting for Hilton to return to his hotel room, Cross also realizes that Hilton possesses evidence that will implicate Cross in the killings of Gil and Herndon. This double motive sets up a different violent passage than the ones that occur previously in the novel. In this passage, Cross assumes the righteousness of the anti-Christ personality of "Lionel Lane." He argues with Hilton about the meaning of life and of power and eventually shoots Hilton in the head. The violence in this scene resonates with the images Wright uses when Bigger kills Mary in Native Son. Cross places Hilton's head between the mattresses of a bed, and Hilton's fingers claw "at Cross's hand that held his head to the bed" (405). While Cross is preparing to kill Hilton, "he turned the knob [of the radio] up and a leaping flood of jazz music filled the room" (403). After he kills Hilton in his violent stupor, "Cross was aware of the dancing waves of jazz music that swirled around the room" (405). The presence of jazz alludes to the murder Cross carries out under his first alias, Charles Webb, and it further reinforces Cross's subversive behavior. Cross's need for revenge also calls to mind Sir Lionel's reaction to his brother. With this murder, Cross, as Lionel Lane,

appears to go completely out of control, and his resort to violence as an answer to his existential struggle leads to both his and his love's destruction.

The circumstances surrounding the murder of Joe Thomas also circle back to the last death Cross causes in the novel, Eva's suicide. After Cross reveals his true identity and his murderous actions to Eva, "she was still as a block of ice" (534). Eva jumps from a window, mirroring Cross's killing of Joe Thomas. Eva's association with ice also appears a few pages later in her death scene. Wright includes his brutal details in the narrator's description of Eva's fallen body:

Yes...There was Eva...She was lying half on her stomach with her face to the pavement, her body twisted so that the toes of her shoes were pointing upwards and her face was hidden in the snow. Already blobs of blood had seeped from her head and Cross could see where someone has stepped on a loosened lock of her blonde hair, crunching and burying it in the snow. (537-8)

The alliteration of s's, b's and l's make this passage stand out in its poetic brutality. Wright's stunning description of Eva's mangled body suggests the impact Eva's death has on Cross's life. Although Cross does not survive for much longer in the novel, he does lose the one meaningful thing he discovers in life: his connection to and love for another human being.

End Notes

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of the ways in which Eva corresponds to and replaces Cross's mother as a maternal figure, see JanMohamed 198-205.

¹¹ For examples of Wright's use of "bl" words, see the passage in which Cross Damon kills both Gil Blount and Herndon (302-5).

Conclusion

Although The Outsider stands apart from Wright's other works in regards to themes and subject matter, the novel's relationship to Black Boy and to Native Son, in particular, reveals a continuous thread of imagery and of symbolism essential to Wright's aesthetic style. While jazz is not necessarily inherently violent, the militancy of the Dirty Dozens and the subversive force of the blues idiom locate Cross's murders within the realm of racial retaliation. Frank McMahon claims that Wright draws on W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness to "balance the specificity of racial oppression with the more general point that self-division typifies modern consciousness" (295). Ultimately, Wright chose to write a novel that reaches beyond the problem of race relations toward a broader understanding of humanity. In doing this, he draws on the African American vernacular as a mode of expression that emerges from the experience of oppression. As an African American, Cross Damon possesses a double-consciousness that allows him, as Ely Houston claims, to be both inside and outside of Western civilization. He can negotiate his existence by drawing on particular African American rhetorical strategies, including improvisation, naming, and masking. In the end, though, Cross Damon's improvisation fails to secure his identity because he rejects the limits and boundaries established by society. He attempts to (re)create himself by rejecting community altogether, and so community, the one thing that can give his life meaning, rejects him.

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