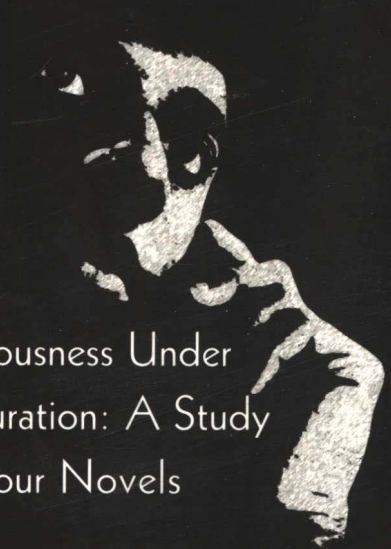


上海市高校教育高地建设项目



*The Triple Consciousness Under
the Impact of Acculturation: A Study
of Richard Wright's Four Novels*

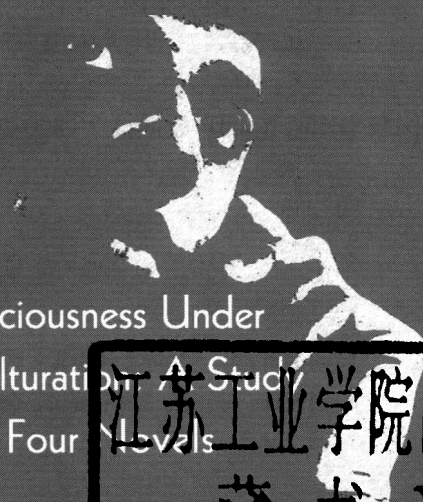
文化移入碰撞下的三重意识

——理查德·赖特的四部长篇小说研究

庞好农 著

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Preface

Richard Wright is a well-known African-American writer who was active in the 1930s and 1940s. His literary works mark the important transition of black literature from the peaceful “Harlem Renaissance” to a period full of rebellious and revolutionary spirit. Most of the black characters in Wright’s four novels, *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *The Long Dream* and *Lawd Today*, are entrapped in what W. E. B. Du Bois calls “double-consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and they fall prey to racism, lose their manhood and selfhood, and end up leading a hopeless life. More importantly, Wright describes in his fiction a new type of black characters who attain a third consciousness in the process of their acculturation. At the instigation of this new consciousness they begin to rebel against racism. My book is a study of Wright’s four novels from the perspective of African-American literary criticism. I have based my analysis on the theory of double consciousness advanced by Du Bois, and the concept of triple consciousness which, I believe, is revealed in Richard Wright’s fiction. The body of this book consists of the following three chapters.

In the first chapter, I deal with the overwhelming impact of acculturation on Wright’s black characters. The more the blacks receive in the process of acculturation, the less they adhere to their African cultural tradition. The positive assimilation of white culture enables the blacks to establish a self-identity much like the whites; it

allows them to become aware of the predicament posed by their double-conscious identity, and it stimulates the formation of a third consciousness which functions importantly in their strivings for racial equality and social justice. The appearance of the third consciousness in the mind of some intelligent and rebellious black characters marks the formation of their triple consciousness built on their double consciousness.

In the second chapter, I investigate the dilemma of triple consciousness caused by the sorrowful race relations, the frustration of American dreams, and identity crises of the major black characters in Wright's fiction. Their third consciousness attained in the process of acculturation gives them confidence, courage, and ambition in their strivings for their goals, but the racist social environment denies them any chance at self-realization and leads to the constant frustration of their third consciousness, even if they are native sons of America. I argue that all of the blacks in Wright's novels are doomed to a social death because they suffer from spiritual hunger and social frustration in that they are deprived of any self-fulfillment in racist America.

In the third chapter, I discuss the tension of triple consciousness of the major black characters in Wright's fiction that is caused by the hostility between blacks and whites, by the blacks' warring ideals and their socialized ambivalence, and by their self-hatred and their drive to violent self-assertion resulting from the social repression of their third consciousness. The blacks who have achieved the third consciousness become more and more intolerant of racial discrimination, of segregation, and of other forms of racial, social, economic and political oppression. The sharp contrast between ideals

and reality generates enormous tension in their triple consciousness and usually leads to their self-assertion and self-fulfillment in spite of law or moral codes.

Richard Wright does not write about violence simply for the sake of violence. His description of the triple-conscious life of these blacks has exploded the racist stereotype of the contented, dim-witted slave and the myth of African-American inferiority. I maintain that the blacks' self-realization is as important to them as their attainment of bread to eat, and that the white oppression of the blacks is the proximate cause of black violence and crime. Thus, the savagery and heinous crimes described in Wright's novels are neither the inborn nature nor the ethnic features of blacks, but the outcome caused by the unjustifiable social system in America. Richard Wright passes on a message to the world: black third consciousness is a spirit that can be destroyed, but cannot be defeated. This indefatigable spirit motivates blacks to engage in their struggle for racial equality and social justice generation after generation. The racial problems revealed in Wright's fiction have not been well solved in America even at the beginning of the 21st century, so the warning on the white society made by Wright half a century ago is still of immediate significance in today's America.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 A Brief Survey of the Critical Reception of Richard Wright's Novels

Richard Wright (1908–1960) is generally considered the most esteemed spokesman for the oppressed black Americans in the late 1930s and 1940s. In his literary career, he has written five novels, *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *Savage Holiday*, *The Long Dream* and *Lawd Today*. Distinguished for his protest fiction, Wright is not only one of the most important modern African-American writers, but also one of the outstanding American writers who has a very high international reputation and whose works are still widely read today. His emergence as an African-American writer is a phenomenon; he endures racial oppression and lack of freedom in the South and the North, but more importantly, he triumphs over them. His successful transformation of that experience into enduring novels has been recognized by readers from different races and from different countries.

His influence on other black writers has been enormous since he begins the black literary tradition of violent self-assertion. Black literary history clearly indicates that after the publication of *Native Son*, quaintness and idealized folksiness disappear from African-American literature. In the 1940s, Wright's influence can be

detected in such works as Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, William Gardner Smith's *Last of the Conquerors*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door*, and Willard Savoy's *Alien Land* (Hakutani, *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* 3-4). The example of *Native Son* enables these black writers to deal with a body of subject matter they have hitherto warily skirted. Wright opens up for black writers not only the bitterness of their lives, but other taboo matters as well—miscegenation, the white-black power structure, and even the singular freedom a black feels in a society that denies him any recognition of his humanity (Stepito, "I Thought I Knew These People" 67). *Native Son* provides many black authors with the courage to "tell it the way it is"^①. In its way this novel liberates them as no other book has done since. Thus, this book blazes a trail in modern African-American literary writing and simultaneously brings fresh air to the dreary and depressive atmosphere of the literary circles of American blacks. However, from the publication of his first novel *Native Son* in 1940 to the present day, the critical response to Wright's novels ranges from bitter condemnation to high praise.

Native Son chronicles the effects of racism on the mind and life of the black youth, Bigger Thomas, and it demonstrates that violence is the inevitable outcome of the black experience in America. "The

① The courage to "tell it the way it is" is the principal requisite of artistic integrity of a writer. "Human revelation is the business of the artist; he must write about what he knows to be true—imaginatively or otherwise—and the first truths he must know are about himself" (Stepito, "I Thought I Knew These People" 67). Through *Native Son*, Wright conveys his attitude to and his outlook at the task of a writer to the effect that a writer should tell true words and provides true description of the life as he experiences and observes in his country. False words about or untrue revelation of the black experiences run counter to the artistic conventions and professional morality as a writer.

day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever” (Howe, “Black Boys and Native Sons” 41). In this novel, Richard Wright “brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture” (Howe, *A World More Attractive* 100). *Native Son* is now widely recognized as Wright’s best novel, and as the culminating work of the socially conscious fiction of the 1940s. It has drawn readers’ and critics’ continuing and wide attention since its publication. The critical response to *Native Son* can be divided roughly into four main phases: the initial reviews of the novel, the reactions to the novel between the 1940s and the mid-1960s, the reassessments of the novel from the late 1960s to the end of 1970s, and the reassessments of the novel in the 1980s and 1990s (Butler, *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero* 12).

Most of the initial reviewers who praise *Native Son* see in it a new kind of central character whose story provides a fresh perspective on black life in America. Sterling A. Brown states that Wright is “the first to give a psychological probing of the consciousness of the outcast, the disinherited, the generation lost in the slum jungles of American civilization” (“Insight, Courage, and Craftsmanship” 54). Malcolm Cowley remarks that Bigger has been taught American ideals of life in schools, magazines and films, but has been denied any means of achieving them. Everything he wants to have or to do is reserved for the whites (“The Case of Bigger Thomas” 38). However, many reviewers are equally vigorous in their condemnation of the novel. Howard Mumford Jones considers this novel a single melodrama and dull propaganda, and he points out that Bigger wavers between being a poor black boy and being a

bogey of amorality (“Uneven Effect” 28). David L. Cohn has a bitter condemnation on the book to the effect that Wright’s preaching of black hatred of whites is on a par with the preaching of white hatred of blacks by the Ku Klux Klan (“The Negro Novel” 47). This extraordinary flurry of reviewing, which takes place over a very brief period of four months after *Native Son* appears, lays the groundwork for much of the later critical debate.

The critical commentary on *Native Son* that appeared a few years after its publication and lasted until the mid-1960s is influenced by the general decline of naturalism as a literary mode, and also by a pervasive disenchantment with leftist politics after World War II. In addition, a perceived improvement in race relations after the war and a hope for the rapid integration of blacks with the mainstream of American life produce a desire for a more “universal,” less “race-conscious” type of literature that speaks to the needs of multiracial readers. William Gardner Smith, for instance, urges African-American novelists to move away from “propaganda” and toward an art centered on “universal” themes, and he especially warns black writers to avoid making their characters “an exaggerated Bigger Thomas with all the stereotyped characteristics three times over” (“The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations” 298). James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison are two of the most noticeable critics of Wright in 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s, the reputation of Wright ebbed as Ellison and Baldwin came into popularity. They attack Wright in widely admired essays that seriously diminish Wright’s literary reputation. Baldwin regards Bigger Thomas as a monster who does not reflect the complex truths of the black experience in America (“Many Thousands Gone” 107–19). Ellison claims that

Native Son is artistically crude and that its vision of black life is too narrow because it is filtered through Bigger's limited perspective (Butler, *The Critical Response to Richard Wright* xxx). One of the few major critics coming to Wright's defense during this period is Irving Howe who sharply criticizes the assessment of Wright made by Baldwin and Ellison. Howe believes that, without revealing the horrible violence in the society, it is hard to tell "the deepest truth about American Negroes" ("Richard Wright: A Word of Farewell" 138).

However, in the 1960s, black militancy preferred the straightforward attitude of Wright, and his popularity rose to new heights (Thomason, "Black Boy" 75). The period between the late 1960s and the end of the 1970s also produced many important essays on *Native Son*. James Negel carefully explores how Bigger's world fails to see him as a human being, and how Bigger is also beset with "blindness" when attempting to visualize himself and his environment ("Images of 'Vision' in *Native Son*" 86-93). Yoshinobu Hakutani studies the subtle distinctions between Wright and Dreiser and argues that, "unlike the hostile racial conflicts dramatized in *Native Son*, what is portrayed in *An American Tragedy* is Clyde Griffiths' mind, which is deeply affected by the hopes and failure of the American dream" ("*Native Son* and *American Tragedy*" 175).

Strong interest in *Native Son* continued through the 1980s and 1990s. The focus of attention on the novel has shifted somewhat, with studies of Wright's political vision diminishing, and analyses of his craftsmanship and literary sources increasing. In *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy*, Joyce Ann Joyce carefully examines

Wright's craftsmanship in *Native Son*, analyzing his meticulous use of rhetorical strategies and literary techniques. Likewise, Robert Butler argues that Wright's achievement in this novel is "not only to project the experience of American black people in all its raw brutality but also to form it into a rich, coherent, balanced vision of life" (*Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero* 30). He concludes that in this novel Wright has achieved the originality, depth, and resonance of a genuine masterwork (qtd. in Kinnamon, *Critical Essays on Richard Wright's Native Son* 23). During this period the great majority of scholars and critics are in general agreement about the essential position of *Native Son* in African-American literature and its great importance in modern American literary traditions, although some reappraisal of a negative sort has also developed, especially among those expressing dissatisfaction with Wright's portrayal of female characters in the novel^①. Much has been written on *Native Son* since 1940, but the richness of its themes and the artistry of its execution will bear continuing scrutiny for the foreseeable future.

Wright's next novel, *The Outsider* (1953), written in France and published thirteen years after *Native Son*, suffers from a

① For example, Sandra Town's "The Black Woman as Whore: Genesis of the Myth" launches an early attack on Wright from a feminist position, the harbinger of more to come. She points out that Bessie in *Native Son* is a "simple, sexual animal, incapable of any kind of transcendence" (qtd. in Kinnamon, *Critical Essays on Richard Wright's Native Son* 11). Likewise, Nagueyalti Warren argues that in *Native Son* black women are depicted as non-feminist asexual beings and as sex objects of little value and she insists that such a description reflects not only the attitudes of the male characters, but also the ambivalence of Richard Wright's psychosexual self both as a man and as a writer (Ibid 21). Calvin Hernton objects to Wright's portrayal of Bigger's mother and sister as "nagging bitches" and his depiction of Bessie as "a pathetic nothing" (139).