

## The Spot In The Mirror: The Role of Gender in Richard Wright's Black Boy

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Shawn Carter a.k.a “Jay-Z” is a very popular African-American rap star that will probably go down in history as one of the best musicians of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. His accolades are numerous as well as the records he’s broken in sales. His music, his lyrics are what he’s most known and respected for – for his portrayals of black life. Shawn Carter managed to tap into an everyday grittiness that taints the lives of millions in the black community.

One song in particular, “99 Problems”, is a well-produced and well-written story of black male life. Rap is known for its double-meaning language and Carter follows suit here. To portray how hard he struggles for success in the world Carter (as Jay-Z) portrays social, fun things such as romance as something he just cannot afford or fit into his conflict-riddled life. Nor does it seem that he would want to if given the chance - the word he uses to capture love and companionship is “bitch.”<sup>1</sup> Carter illuminates racial injustice and police corruption by what they are not - a woman, someone or something apparently too trivial to take seriously.

Despite popular notions to the contrary neither Shawn Carter nor other rap stars invented the use of the feminine as a mirror of personal and social ills, or in this case, as a mirror to the black man’s plight. In a patriarchal and racist centuries-old culture this has been the method of choice in many of our literary and artistic narratives. Richard Wright, the famed black writer of the 1940’s is no exception. In 1940 he received critical acclaim for his novel Native Son and, later, for his autobiography Black Boy in 1945. Both were praised for their truthful renderings of black male life. In his 1993 introduction to Black Boy Jerry W. Ward called it “a book that nicely blended the meaning, the challenge, and the significance of being Southern, black, and male in America.”<sup>2</sup> The lyrics of a talented rap star and the literature of a talented writer, while so far apart in style, genre, and intention, are two sides of the same gendered coin.

There’s a larger statement about *manhood* existing underneath the surface of most common misogynistic language today. The final lyric of “99 Problems” changes order and Jay-Z states that *being* a bitch is not an option for him in his hard-knock life. His concluding line reveals it’s not “women problems” the protagonist can’t afford, it’s being weak, a “bitch”, that he cannot risk. Both layers of the song share the female, or the feminine, as its foundation. Again, the protagonist uses the feminine as a mirror with which to consider himself: not only can the artist not afford

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<sup>1</sup> Jay-Z, “99 Problems,” by Shawn Carter, The Black Album, Roc-A-Fella Records, LLC, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ward, Jerry W., introduction, Black Boy, by Richard Wright (New York: Perennial Classics, 1945) xi.

women in his life, he can't afford to *be* like one either.

Why does this matter regarding Richard Wright and his autobiography Black Boy? Nearly sixty years before Shawn Carter wrote out his manhood on the body of the woman in explicitly degrading terms Wright did the same when telling the story of his own manhood in subtler, though still disturbing, language. I am not at all trying to say that misogyny is a black literary tradition, not in the least. In fact, I'd like to argue that misogyny is such an intrinsic part of an overarching racist patriarchy that even its resisters cannot escape it in their own seemingly resistant language. Where both artists attempt to resist their oppression through language they instead perpetuate it through their use of the feminine thus bolstering racist patriarchal structure. In the end the racist structures these men exist in are not weakened but *strengthened* when its own victims incorporate it into their own language and acts. So, despite the convincing critiques Black Boy offers regarding the racist hypocrisy of the North and the brutal Jim Crow South, Richard Wright's ultimate attack on American racism fails as true resistance.

I'd like to first address the unique and tricky issues that an autobiography poses for the reader. Do we hold the author more or less responsible for his story's themes? How much of the narrative is truth and how much is the author making up as myth or fiction? Richard Wright's very act of *writing* down his "life" means there's some self-mythologizing occurring – it's the author still choosing what to keep, what to omit, what to exaggerate in order to convey his character. That self doesn't have to be whole or who he'd actually say he were in reality but nonetheless there is a self, a "personality" that the author provides us to read.

In his book On Autobiography Philip Lejeune defines the genre as "the story of [the author's] personality" and I believe this to be the best way to read Black Boy. For a personality is never finished, there's no final chapter. Black Boy fits all of Lejeune's specific criteria such as the situation of the author where the author and the narrator are identical; Lejeune also demands "[t]he subject must be *primarily* individual life, the genesis of the personality; but the chronicle and social or political history can also be part of the narrative."<sup>3</sup> We know that the author and the narrator are the same by their shared use of the name "Richard" plus the narrator's mention of writing "Big Boy Leaves Home" which is the first story Wright published in 1936; the narrator's personal growth and struggles set within the larger context of Jim Crow racism fit Black Boy in Lejeune's social criteria as well.

Using the self as a symbol for larger issues runs the risk of unintended self-revelation. We will see that the genesis of the narrator's personality written by Richard Wright occurs at the locus of the feminine within the unconsciously shared space of racism's misogyny. I argue that the genesis of Wright's narrator is not one of rebellion and resistance, but it

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<sup>3</sup> Philippe Lejeune, On Autobiography, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 5.

is the genesis of *Wright's* misogyny as well as Richard's – it is the story of a failed resistance.

The delineation of resistance that earned *Black Boy* praise ultimately collapses into itself through the holes of gender. Wright's autobiographical narrator, whom I will now refer to as "Richard", brilliantly reflects the racist oppressive structure he lives in so as to flip and nullify it for his own desperate liberation; but his narrative is unfortunately saturated with the broken, fragile, threatening, demeaned or demeaning black woman. Though Richard offers himself up as a mirror to racism in order to judge and condemn it the women in his life serve as mirrors in which he negatively views himself. Never are the women to have their own agency in the same way Richard gets to fight for and eventually gain. Often nameless the women in *Black Boy* are tragic in their repressive positions of subjugation.

For example, after describing a particularly traumatic experience Richard pauses to step out of his tale and offer a critique of America. He notes:

(I know that not race alone, not color alone, but the daily values that give meaning to life stood between me and those white girls with whom I worked. Their constant outward-looking...made them dream and fix their eyes upon the trash of life, made it impossible for them to learn a language which could have taught them to speak of what was in their or others' hearts. The words of their souls were the syllables of popular songs.)<sup>4</sup>

In his own critique he uses women – in this case, white women – as an example of American emptiness. Richard's stepping out of his narrative to give this parenthetical critique implies that the *author* Richard Wright is speaking to us, the readers. Again, the implied "I" in this pause also points to a "you" – the reader. This conversational detail also fits Lejeune's definition for autobiography. For my purposes in this essay, what both Richard and Richard Wright choose to talk about directly to the reader points to a deep-seated sexism rather than an antiracism. Richard frequently ignores the plight of black women in addition to taking their oppression as a given. The mirror stage model provided by literary theorist Jacques Lacan may help to better understand the origins of Richard's misogynistic lens.

In the first paragraph of *Black Boy* four-year-old Richard presents his mother and grandmother as distant and frightening. He recalls:

All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to *keep still*, warning me that I *must make no noise*. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient [...] I was dreaming of running and playing and shouting, but the vivid image of Granny's old, white, wrinkled, grim face [...] made me afraid.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, 1945 (New York: Perennial Classics, 2003) 273.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 3, emphasis mine.

So from our very first introduction to Black Boy's Richard we're meant to see his female authority figures as stifling and holding back the creative child. Despite Wright's autobiographical intention to reveal and battle racism, his narrative begins with his subjugation at the hands of *black women* not of whites. In Lacanian terms Richard's mirrored reflection would be his mother, his grandmother, and his Aunt Addie who arrives after his mother falls ill and was especially abusive to Richard. Aunt Addie beats him as a child and terrorizes him so badly in school that he develops a lifelong fear of public speaking; his grandmother repeatedly battles his budding secularism and literary imagination; and his mother fails him most of all – his go-to for all of his questions her mysterious illness takes his mother away from him. Also, her illness conveniently coincides with one of the narrator's first Jim Crow experiences. Richard relays:

'Why are they taking mama that way?' I asked Uncle Edward.

'There are no hospital facilities for colored, and this is the way we have to do it,' he said.

I watched the men take the stretcher down the steps; then I stood on the sidewalk and watched them lift my mother into the ambulance and drive away. I knew that my mother had gone out of my life; I could feel it.<sup>6</sup>

In the second half of Black Boy Richard's emotions are more troublesome. When he first arrives in Chicago's South Side and finds a room to rent in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ross a disturbing passage follows. Mrs. Ross's daughter, Bess, is an attractive young woman of seventeen years who reads on a fifth grade level and immediately "loves" Richard upon meeting him. He experiences many conflicting emotions towards her ranging from disgust to sexual desire:

*What could I do with a girl like this? Was I dumb or was she dumb? [...] Could I ever talk to her about what I felt, hoped? Could she ever understand my life?...But I knew that such questions did not bother her [...]. I kissed and petted her. She was warm, eager, childish, pliable [...]. I disengaged my hand from hers. I looked at her and wanted either to laugh or to slap her...<sup>7</sup>*

Even when Richard is directly involved in a woman's oppression, or is a witness to it, as we will see, he never pauses to fully consider black women as fellow victims of oppression; instead her oppression symbolizes *his* fear. In fact, the one time Richard does pause to note the economic plight of black women he blatantly sidesteps his own implication in their exploitation:

I hungered for relief and, as a salesman of insurance to many young

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 99.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 217-219, emphasis mine.

black *girls*, I found it. There were many comely black housewives who, trying *desperately* to keep up their insurance payments, were willing to make bargains *to escape* paying a ten-cent premium. I had a long, tortured affair with one girl by paying her ten-cent premium each week. She was an illiterate black *child* with a baby whose father she did not know.<sup>8</sup>

Not only is the narrator's lover nameless she is described as a child whose significance in the world is meaningless. Not one page later the author continues Richard's description of life as an agent and pauses to note the particular struggles of black women again:

That was the way the black women were regarded by the black agents...[The agents] would insist upon [sex], using the claim money as a bribe. If the woman refused, they would report to the office that the woman was a malingerer. The average black woman would submit because she needed the money badly.<sup>9</sup>

The reader is never offered an explanation as to why Richard never sees himself as a part of these women's' exploitation, despite his own "relationship" with a client.

What matters here is that in 384 pages the only two references Richard Wright makes to the narrator's sexuality involve women who are infantile and useless. Most importantly, both women gesture to the narrator's own self-consciousness, revealed by his urges to harm the women. Richard voices his frustration at the his lover/client mindlessness:

‘Can’t you really read?’ I asked.  
 ‘Naw,’ she giggled. ‘You know I can’t read.’[...]  
 ‘You all right,’ she said, giggling. ‘I like you.’  
 ‘I could kill you,’ I said [...]  
 ‘You crazy, man,’ she said.  
 ‘Maybe I am,’ I muttered, angry that I was sitting beside a human being to whom I could not talk...<sup>10</sup>

It is not just a matter of *ignoring* women, or, rather, excluding women in this critical commentary on racism; Wright simultaneously and paradoxically glosses over women as well as perpetuates their subjugation. Worse, the value, or lack thereof, Richard determines for these woman warrants a mortal violence.

In his essay "Negating the Negation as a Form of Affirmation in Minority Discourse" UC Berkeley Professor Abdul R. JanMohamed argues that Wright negates racism's negation in order to affirm his human

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 289, emphasis mine.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 293.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 290, emphasis mine.

existence.<sup>11</sup> If racism is about stripping one of his/her humanity and selfhood, Wright must invalidate this attack to both illuminate the racist structure for what it is and, thus, to resist it. His own title *Black Boy* introduces this negation-turned-affirmation by flipping the common degrading “boy” reference to black men into a reclamation of his own identity and narrative.

Strangely enough, for JanMohamed’s argument to work he himself must ignore the misogyny of Wright. He never directly discusses women, save one of Richard’s sick mother and *there* he cites her illness as a symbol for *Richard’s* suffering. Richard’s first job involved witnessing a gruesome attack on a black woman. But, when he discusses this job – one of the moments when Richard faces his negation at the hands of white employers – JanMohamed completely omits the brutal attack. In *Black Boy* Richard recalls:

One morning...the boss and his son drove up in their car. A frightened black woman sat between them. They got out and half dragged and half kicked the woman into the store. White people passed and looked on without expression. A white policeman watched from the corner, twirling his night stick: but he made no move. I watched out of the corner of my eyes, but *I never slackened the strokes of my chamois upon the brass...*I heard shrill screams coming from the rear room of the store; later the woman stumbled out, bleeding, crying, holding her stomach, her clothing torn...the policeman met her, grabbed her, accused her of being drunk, called a patrol wagon and carted her away.

When I went to the rear of the store, the boss and his son were washing their hands at the sink...the floor was bloody, strewn with wisps of hair and clothing...

‘Boy, that’s what we do to niggers when they don’t pay their bills.’<sup>12</sup>

In his essay all JanMohamed has to say about it is that:

...[Wright] soon becomes a victim of casual violence intended to teach him ‘his place,’ and, most dishearteningly for him, he finds his ambitions crushed by the threat of violence.<sup>13</sup>

JanMohamed uses the woman’s brutalization as a sign of *Richard’s* threatened liberation. And Richard Wright completely overlooks his own

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<sup>11</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed, “Negating the Negation as a Form of Affirmation in Minority Discourse: The Construction of Richard Wright as Subject” *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1995) 107-123.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, 179-80, emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> JanMohamed, 114-115.

subject's frozen state during the attack that as a reflection of the woman's entrapment by the white men. This is what I argue is the leveling and molding of race with gender, or, perhaps, racism with misogyny. Yet Wright cannot or chooses not to see this link despite his own story's striking example.

Later, JanMohamed argues that:

For [the author] to understand thoroughly the system and the effects of racial oppression and to bring them to the light of full consciousness, he has to be entirely open to the system, he has to internalize it fully while maintaining a space within his mind that remains uncontaminated by the racist ideology – he has to retain a vantage point from which he can observe, critique, and oppose white ascendancy.<sup>14</sup>

But is it possible to “internalize it-fully” whilst retaining a “vantage point”? Jacques Lacan certainly wouldn't have thought so when he wrote his mirror stage theory that doomed us all to forever repeat ourselves.<sup>15</sup> And I'd argue the same: that the process of internalizing anything, especially something so large as the system of subjugating systems, requires a residue left with the resister. In her essay “One is Not Born a Woman” feminist theorist Monique Wittig argues that one cannot use the language of the oppressor to speak for the oppressed so it's instead a stepping out of rather than a leaping into that could truly attack a structure.<sup>16</sup>

To quote the cultural critic bell hooks Wright's Black Boy exists in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.<sup>17</sup> It's patriarchy that is crucial to our understanding Richard's failure to critique or even to escape his racist origins. We have to look at misogyny and sexism as another dimension of racism's architecture. So to challenge it requires an abandonment of *all* its dimensions, or the challenge fails and merely folds in on itself.

Richard's early experiences with women closest to him collectively shape his notions of self. So it's no surprise that the author writes black women as *attending* the worst moments of his life. Lacan's psychoanalytic approach helps us to see the author's *projection* of both fear and anger onto women. Returning to his two “romantic interests” Richard internalizes the women's characters as negative reflections on his character:

I had never dreamed that anyone [e.g. Bess] would accept me so simply, so completely, without question or the least hint of personal aggrandizement. The truth was that I had – even though I had fought

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<sup>14</sup> JanMohamed, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative,” comp. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001) 1285-1290.

<sup>16</sup> Monique Wittig, “One Is Not Born A Woman,” The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, comp. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001) 2019.

<sup>17</sup> bell hooks, Killing Rage: Ending Racism (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1995) 16.

against it – grown to accept the value of myself that my old environment had created in me....<sup>18</sup>

And again with the illiterate insurance client:

I stared at her and wondered just what a life like hers meant in the scheme of things, and I came to the conclusion that it meant absolutely nothing. *And neither did my life mean anything.*<sup>19</sup>

Richard is critically aware of the racist oppression that binds him. But he never seems to see the role of women nor the theme of sexism as involved in the same oppressive structure from which he's running. Rather, this is the continuum of white patriarchy that he takes as natural, and perhaps this stems from his negatively identifying with women at an early age. We have seen from the author's own opening lines that he experienced harm at the hands of his female caretakers *before* facing discrimination. Indeed, it's his mother who unintentionally introduces her son to racism when she's carted away. Paradoxically, it is such a blind spot that ultimately holds down Richard *and* his author, still trapped in their original oppressive spaces.

JanMohamed concludes his essay with the idea that:

... *Black Boy* is remarkable not so much for its rebellion as for the control that Wright had to exercise and the internal struggle that he had to wage against being engulfed by the racist sovereignty.<sup>20</sup>

This control is actually incomplete and a repressive discipline achieved at the expense of the feminine. This "control" for which Richard Wright is praised is the same discipline Jay-Z raps about in "99 Problems." That is, in my opinion, the deadly beauty of oppression – that even when admiring his liberated reflection the resister's still trapped in oppression's house.

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<sup>18</sup> Wright, 219.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 290, emphasis mine.

<sup>20</sup> JanMohamed, 118.



Whether it's through speaking protest, rapping it, or writing it there's still the shadow in the corner, a smudge in the ink, keeping one's reflection from completion. And those resisting are left puzzled scratching at the spot on the glass.

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