

**Between lawfulness and lawlessness:
The conceptual boundary between the system
and the individual in Richard Wright's *Native Son***

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the conceptual boundary created by the notions of lawfulness and lawlessness on the individual. Law in Western culture is a goal-oriented instrument of state. The legal limits established in legislative acts and judicial decisions delineate a territory for potential action. As a normative domain, law guides human conduct in the process of individual practical reasoning. In states where codes and statutes go against natural human inclinations, individuals view the conceptual boundary of law as a challenge, which leads to conflicts between the system and the individual. I analyze such a conflict in the personal narrative of Bigger Thomas, the main protagonist in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The growing tension caused by the discriminatory system of Jim Crow laws ends in the character crossing legal- and custom-determined boundaries.

Key words

Jim Crow laws, legal positivism, morality, natural law, natural rights, racism, Richard Wright

**Pojęcia czynu zgodnego z prawem i czynu zabronionego.
Konceptualna granica pomiędzy systemem a jednostką
w powieści Richarda Wrighta *Native Son***

Abstrakt

Artykuł dotyczy zagadnienia metaforycznej granicy, jaka tworzy się między pojęciami czynu zgodnego z prawem a czynu zabronionego. Prawo w kulturze zachodniej jest instrumentem władzy nastawionym na osiągnięcie celu. Ograniczenia ustanowione w czynnościach legislacyjnych lub przez wykładnię przepisów prawa tworzą terytorium do potencjalnego działania. Jako domena normatywna prawo kieruje ludzkim zachowaniem poprzez proces praktycznego rozumowania. W systemach, w których prawo zostało ustanowione w sprzeczności z prawem naturalnym, ta metaforyczna granica staje się wyzwaniem dla jednostki i prowadzi do jej konfliktu z państwem. Artykuł zgłębia ten konflikt z punktu widzenia osobistej narracji Biggera Thomasa, głównego bohatera powieści Richarda Wrighta pt. *Native Son*. Rosnące napięcie powodowane przez dyskryminacyjny system praw Jima Crowa prowadzi do tego, że Bigger przekracza granice wyznaczone przez amerykańskie prawo i obyczaje.

Słowa kluczowe

moralność, pozytywizm prawny, prawa Jima Crowa, prawa naturalne, prawo naturalne, rasizm, Richard Wright

1. Introduction

Rousseau begins *The Social Contract* with the words: “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains” (1762: 2) highlighting the main conflict of the Occident – the desire for freedom clashing with the necessity to function within the limits of conventions. The specific significance of these boundaries is acquired when they are qualified by an adjective: political, geographical, cultural, mental, to name a few. Established by varying social facts, some boundaries are custom-related, while others are determined by prejudices. At times, laws are drafted

which are characterized by an obvious moral ambivalence: they discriminate one social group in order to guarantee the dominance of another. My contention is that in unjust statutes the metaphorical line running between the concepts of lawfulness and lawlessness forms a conceptual boundary and leads to a conflict between the system and the individual. Referring to discriminatory segregation laws in twentieth-century America, I analyze Richard Wright's *Native Son* to demonstrate how the dichotomy is conveyed as a restraining force: limiting personal freedom, it inspires the main protagonist to cross the boundary in an act of defiance.

2. *Native Son* literary criticism

The novel at the centre of my analysis is a popular subject of research and critique. To start with the earliest and most prominent of Wright's critics, James Baldwin ("Everybody's Protest Novel" 1955) challenges Wright's agenda by claiming that each protest novel legitimizes the logic it aims to denounce, for in order to fight collective norms one must first consider them valid. Hence, Baldwin recognizes, as I do, that laws, morals, or rationalizing logic become binding only when individually accepted; however, he does so only to make a point without exploring the codes' normative nature. Dorothy S. Redden (1976) and Robert James Butler (1984) highlight in their argument the narrative instances in *Native Son* that I, too, find important, yet for different reasons and to varying conclusions. Furthermore, Anthony Reed's essay (2012) broadly discusses the territorial boundaries visible in Wright's depiction of racially divided Chicago and mentions the social implications resulting from the civic sub-status of African-Americans, yet fails to investigate the jurisprudential origins of such a status quo.

The themes of these investigations are often consistent with the perspective considered in this paper, while their methodologies as well as conclusions differ. To the best of my

knowledge, no published criticism has made an attempt to link law – its bounding force and territorial nature – with the geopolitics and psychology of *Native Son*. The literary contribution to understanding the functioning and the letter of law has been investigated by scholars of the Law and Literature movement.¹ Nevertheless, exploring the social and cultural significance of American segregation laws through the African-American literary corpus seems to be outside the movement's scope.

As to literary critique, two scholars come very close to my conclusions in their analyses; both explore the psychological level of the novel. Robert Stanton (1969) investigates the moral dimension of Wright's narrative. He discusses the social requirement to live in accord with the moral law in terms of imprisonment and sees the murders described in the novel as outrageous attempts to break free from moral constraints (1969: 56, 57). Sheldon Brivic's (1974) argument is built around the conflict of values he discerns in the novel. I occasionally refer to *Native Son* scholarship – particularly to the work of Brivic or Stanton – to indicate those instances of criticism intersecting with my argument, pointing to both similarities and differences.

3. Law's normative function and its boundaries

My argument is grounded in three assumptions. First, law is the chief normative domain in Western culture. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau notes that: "the laws of justice [...] merely make for the good of the wicked and the undoing of the just, when the just man observes them towards everybody and nobody observes them towards him. Conventions and laws are therefore needed to join rights to duties and refer justice to its

¹ For the purpose statement of the movement see Richard A. Posner's "Law and literature: A relation reargued" in *Virginia Law Review* 72/6: 1351-1392; for more information on the connection between law and literature see the movement's scholarly journal *Law and Literature*, previously titled *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*.

object” (1762: 27). That is to say: in pursuit of social peace, law is a safeguard mechanism providing an incentive for the immoral and guiding their conduct. Hence, rules regulate, constrict, and allow. Consequently, it can be said that law performs the function of maintaining territorial imperatives, as does the border in its geopolitical dimension. There seems to be a metaphorical affinity between law and border, which takes me to my second assertion: the concept of law is construed in terms of territory with legislative acts establishing its metaphorical boundaries.²

Third, any constraint of law is a constraint on an individual psyche. To enforce a state of social order, law must be binding on its subjects. Legal philosophers differ in explaining the social phenomenon of obedience; nevertheless, they all agree that the faculty of practical reason is the condition to abide by the law. If law is ultimately validated in the individual process of practical reasoning, one may choose not to observe it. For instance, the utilitarians acknowledge that disobeying unfair or inefficient law is justified (Green 2009: §2). In the same vein, Hart (1955) holds that there is merely a *prima facie* obligation to obey law, grounded in the rule’s fairness but also limited by it. What follows, a legislator sets boundaries for citizens, yet the metaphorical line drawn between the lawful and the unlawful regulates, constricts, and allows certain potentiality that must be recognized by an individual before it is acted on.

² I find the evidence of the conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) LAW IS A TERRITORY in the following common expressions: law can be *narrowly or broadly construed*; law *has been stretched* to prosecute a certain violation; intellectual property law *draws boundaries* around human creativity; violators will be prosecuted *to the fullest extent of the law*; someone is *above the law* or *beyond the reach of law*; or someone has acted either *within their rights* or *acts outside of law*; a certain action will be prosecuted *under the Espionage Act* etc.

4. Natural law, positive law, and morality

The term *law* has been used in a general manner so far. At this point, however, it is crucial to select the particular definitions of law that are further referred to. Instead of one law, there are different areas and, more importantly, varying philosophies of law. Consequently, the crucial philosophical questions: What is law and what are the criteria for legal validity? can be answered in more than one way, each time demarcating a different territory. I restrict my argument to certain aspects of natural law and to legal positivism, for I find the contention between these legal traditions to be of the same nature as the tension between individual freedom and authority.

Natural law is a set of universally valid norms determined by the human inclination to live in society. Naturalists argue that there are rational objective moral limits to legislative acts. Natural law interests me only due to its almost one-to-one overlap with *morality* defined as a universally shared body of standards underlying human coexistence. By contrast, in the positive law tradition “law is a matter of what has been posited (ordered, decided, practiced, tolerated, etc.); [...] positivism is the view that law is a social [not natural] construction” (Green 2009). Despite differences, these two traditions have some common ground: natural law (moral) postulates can become posited legal norms, but only through a legislative process.

The inclusion of morality in posited law is thus acknowledged, yet both camps seem to define the concept differently. Whereas naturalists argue for *universal morality*, positivists hold that law may reflect a *morality shared within a society*. One of the contentions of the Separability Thesis³ reads: “the best explanation for a society’s laws includes reference to the moral ideals current in that society” (Green 2009). The claim allows into law what John Austin calls *positive morality* –

³ The Separability Thesis argues (1) that law and morality are separate and distinct concepts and (2) that the legal validity of a norm is not necessarily determined by its moral content. The Overlap Thesis, on the other hand, presupposes a necessary link between law and morality.

moral customs practiced by the society in question along with the opinions and prejudices held by this society (Green 2009: §4.2). Another notion of *morality*, again differently construed, appears in Lon L. Fuller's *The Morality of Law* (1964). Fuller argues for the *procedural naturalism* of legal systems – law's internal morality that lies in its essentially purposive character. First, law's objectives – social order and guiding human behavior – are morally valuable. Second, to achieve these goals, law must conform to eight minimal principles of legality, the internal consistency between laws within a legal system being one of them.⁴ Together, the morally charged purpose of law and its inner procedural coherence equate in Fuller's view to the natural (in the sense of innate) morality of law.

I have outlined two theories of jurisprudence: natural law and legal positivism. The latter is recognized in political science, while the former, less significant to this field, still plays a prominent role in philosophical discourses on ethics. Both share a number of principles and thus their territories overlap, but only to a certain extent. More importantly, the boundaries of these territories run along the same binaries of lawfulness and lawlessness, yet each time they include (or exclude) different principles. I now examine how these conflicting value systems work in practice, reading Richard Wright's *Native Son* against the background of American segregation laws.

5. The ethics of American segregation laws

Ambiguous as it sounds, the American legal system tainted by the Jim Crow laws⁵ could be arguably seen as moral, at least

⁴ Fuller (1965) claims that maintaining social order is law's essential function. To perform it, a rule must be: (1) sufficiently general; (2) publicly promulgated; (3) prospective in effect; (4) clear and intelligible; (5) consistent; (6) within the powers of the affected parties; (7) constant through time; and (8) administered in a manner congruent with its wording.

⁵ Jim Crow laws were statutes enacted by the state or local governments in the South in reaction to the so-called Reconstruction Amendments to the U.S. Constitution: the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) that proscribed slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) containing the Equal Protection Clause

according to Fuller's and Austin's theories. In the light of Fuller's *procedural naturalism*, the natural law doctrines of the Declaration of Independence can be found compliant with the legal separation of races. Fuller's principle of consistency was satisfied through the legal doctrine "separate but equal", which provided the legal justification for the Jim Crow laws until 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was issued.

Confirming the doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), a landmark constitutional law case challenging the Louisiana Separate Car Act under the Equal Protection Clause, Justice Henry Billings Brown held that by enacting segregation laws, the State remained within its constitutional boundaries:

The object of the [fourteenth] amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but, in the nature of things, it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either. (Brown 163 U.S. 537)

A number of points in this fragment reflect the logic of Fuller and Austin. First, fighting social inequality is not an issue to be addressed by the judiciary: constitutional law provides its subjects with equal political rights not equal social status. Second, the same can be said about promoting racial integration. Hence, as far as internal consistency is concerned, Louisiana state legislators did not violate the Fourteenth Amend-

that granted Blacks full citizenship; and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) that prohibited the federal and state governments from disenfranchisement. Hence, no law could deny African-Americans their civil rights. However, there was no constitutional limit as to how local governments could regulate access to these entitlements. As such, the Southern state legislators (exercising their constitutional right to self-government) enacted a number of laws that systematically denied Blacks equal access to public services and education (segregation laws), or to vote registration (literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses). The Jim Crow laws were drafted to revive the Southern Black Codes that had restricted the civil liberties of African-Americans in the post-Civil War years. They were finally overruled by two federal bills: the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Right Act (1965).

ment: they provided public services to both races. Third, Brown refers to the cultural concept of race built on claims of alleged biological discrepancies (“distinctions based upon color”) and the unwillingness of the communities to mingle. Thus he acknowledges that the racial prejudices and social standards of the slavery era were moral customs actually practiced in Louisiana and, as such, possible as a source of law. In short, Brown subscribes to Austin’s theory of *positive morality*.

6. Notions of right and wrong in American *positive morality*

The boundaries of law I am interested in are state-made (posit-ed law). They stake out a territory where an individual may be forced to live against his/her nature. The crimes of Bigger Thomas, the main protagonist in *Native Son*, are the result of functioning within such boundaries. Wright conveys the territorialism of American post-slavery laws on a number of levels. The first aspect is physical: he depicts a city divided between two races. The second level is social: the interaction between these communities reveals a strained relationship and allows the reader to grasp its social gravity. Collective in nature, both aspects lack an individual perspective; hence, I only mention them without giving more details. The third level is ethical: Wright offers a moral evaluation and prepares the ground for the psychological dimension of the novel.

In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born”, mocking the *positive morality* of the South as incongruent with the Creator’s “unalienable Rights” (as phrased by the Framers), Wright comes back to his childhood experiences: “In Dixie, there are two worlds, the white world and the black world, [...] there are [...] white churches and black churches, [...] and, for all I know, a white God and a black God” (1940: xi). The hypocrisy of a religious devotion that, nevertheless, does not exclude diehard racism within the Bible Belt is evident in these words: the oxymoronic co-existence of two Gods within a monotheistic faith reflects

the contradiction. If, as Thomas Jefferson put it, “all men are created equal” and endowed by God with natural rights, the double standard of American *positive morality*, along with the denial of those most fundamental rights to African-Americans, must be seen as incongruent with the very standard on which the country was built, let alone with the moral content of God’s teachings.

In the same vein but more explicitly, Wright outlines a vision of America as a state founded on unjust laws through the words of Bigger’s defense attorney, Max. Redden, too, discusses the same narrative instance, without, however, recognizing its jurisprudential anchorage.⁶ The utterance lies at the heart of my analysis: I see it as the most accurate diagnosis of the Jim Crow laws. Max builds the closing arguments around what he calls the “first wrong” (1940: 357) upon which the whole system was later constructed as legally valid. This “first wrong” – the assumption that the black race, as subhuman, has no rights⁷ – became a law; observing it was right. The reversal, as Max argues, has been rationalized: “Let us not be naïve: men do what they must, even when they feel that they are fulfilling the will of God” (1940: 359). Further, he unravels the logic of the system built on slavery that was perpetuated in the form of the Jim Crow laws pointing out the morality practiced by the white community: “Men adjust themselves to their land; they create their own laws of being; their notions of right and wrong” (1940: 360). The order of objects in this utterance

⁶ According to Redden, Max does not employ the “first wrong” to place the blame for Bigger’s crimes on the system. Neither does he do so to voice his moral outrage or inspire pity for Black Americans. Redden believes that Max simply aims at tracing back historically the reasons for forming a particular kind of mindset in order to establish “the long chain of causation” for Bigger’s alienation and anti-social attitude (1976: 114). Consequently, the moral ambivalence of American posited law remains inexplicit in the background of her argument.

⁷ For instance, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), the U.S. Supreme Court held that “A [...] negro of the African race, whose ancestors were brought to this country and sold as slaves, is not a ‘citizen’ within the meaning of the Constitution of the United States” (60 U.S. 393). As such, all African Americans, whether free or enslaved, were denied standing to sue in federal court.

– land, laws of being, notions of right and wrong – follows the principle of cause and effect: first there is a purpose – control over a territory; then establishment of the laws that safeguard the interests of the controllers; and the final step – making anew the notions of right and wrong, that is, establishing mental boundaries for the controlled. In short, Max argues that a system built on injustice can be legal in the light of positivism, yet its adapted (hence unnatural, not universal) morality is open to question.

As an instrument, posited law is used to an end other than, as Fuller argues, the moral end of safeguarding social order by guiding human behavior. Therefore, by unraveling geographical and economic dominance as the origin of normative institutions, Wright points to their moral ambivalence to begin with.

7. Denying natural rights

The final level which conveys the territorialism of the Jim Crow laws in *Native Son*, distinguishing this novel from many others, is psychological: Wright's narrator shows the fictional world through Bigger's psyche, with all the psychological limitations imposed on his race by the system through its normative institutions. To see Wright's plot as an example of the crossing of law-determined boundaries, one has to read it as an account of emotional tension between an individual, Bigger Thomas, and the state, white America with its positive law keeping races apart physically and, more significantly, psychologically. Thus the other way to view the territorialism of these codes is to see their profound effect on the way in which each African-American perceived himself/herself.

Perhaps the greatest revelation the audience has while reading *Native Son* is the discovery of Bigger's alienation from his own people: his life is deprived of the most fundamental natural rights – a sense of belonging and kinship. Consulting with Max in the midst of the trial, Bigger confesses that he hates

and fears his own race as much as white men. Left alone in his cell Bigger, for the first time, longs for a “response of recognition, [...] union, identity; [...] a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life” (1940: 335). Bigger’s alienation from his own people, fiercely criticized by Baldwin (1955),⁸ is a byproduct of systematic racial discrimination. In my opinion, Bigger’s state of mind in this matter conveys, most powerfully though perhaps not in the most immediate fashion, the immense psychological force of American posited law achieved by its indissoluble internal coherence.

To continue in the same vein, another natural right denied to Bigger is, in egalitarian terms, his equality in fundamental worth. Wright frequently stresses that one of the consequences of racial oppression is self-loathing and an overwhelming feeling of inferiority. The reader learns how deeply a lack of self-worth has been drilled into Bigger’s psyche, reading about his interaction with the Daltons: Bigger never speaks spontaneously, replies only in monosyllables, his gaze fixed on the floor. The feeling of inadequacy never leaves him. On his way to see Henry Dalton for a job, Bigger stands in front of the Daltons’ residence confused as to whether he should enter the house through the front door and, at the same time, aware that if he takes too long to make up his mind he is bound to be arrested as a potential burglar. Bigger is uncomfortable with the personal questions posed by Mary and Jan: he takes their interest and kindness for mockery.

In fact, narrative instances such as the scene juxtaposing Mary’s absolute confidence with Bigger’s constant feeling of inadequacy or confessions made to Max contribute most to the reader’s understanding of how crushing the grip of segregation laws was on the Black individual. Thus, it is the psychological dimension of Wright’s prose that conveys the force of Jim Crow better than the exposition of the system presented by Max. The

⁸ Bigger’s lack of ethnic solidarity is the subject of Baldwin’s harshest criticism (“Many Thousands Gone” 1955). In his opinion, Wright fails to present his protagonist as a realistic believable symbol of his own people by denying him any relationship with them.

system with its hostile legal- and custom-determined boundaries has a still greater impact on Bigger than only playing havoc with his self-confidence. Being an object not a subject for the white race, he soon begins to think of himself as one. He confesses to Max:

You just keep moving all the time, doing what other folks say. You ain't a man no more. You just work day in and day out so the world can roll on and other people can live. [...] [White folks] own everything. [...] They don't even let you feel what you want to feel. (1940: 326-7)

The sense of agency is an essential condition of humanness, born out of a feeling of control over one's life. Thus another natural right denied to Bigger is his right to be human. Bigger has been deprived of freedom to shape his destiny and consequently has been stripped of his humanness. Paradoxically, he seeks to regain control in crossing the metaphorical lines drawn by law.

8. Crime as a free choice

The murders of Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears are typically seen by scholars as a turning point in the narrative. For instance, Brivic interprets Bigger's crimes as "act[s] of rebellion" and the result of the intensifying struggle that he identifies as Bigger's internal fight, and not as a conflict between the system and the individual (1974: 234). Certainly, transgressing the boundaries of the Jim Crow laws in deliberate unlawful conduct born out of frustration is what inspired Wright to create his main protagonist. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born", he enumerates the individuals whose qualities were transmitted to Bigger Thomas:

And then there was Bigger No. 4, whose only law was death. The Jim Crow laws of the south were not for him. But as he laughed and cursed and broke them, he knew that someday he'd have to

pay for his freedom. His rebellious spirit made him violate all the taboos and consequently he always oscillated between moods of intense elation and depression. He was never happier than when he had outwitted some foolish custom, and he was never more melancholy than when brooding over the impossibility of his ever being free. (1940: x)

Bigger No. 4 is one of many African-American boys whose open defiance filled the young Wright with a mixture of fear and admiration. Functioning within a territory limited by law and custom where compliance was a must, the only free choice African-Americans had was to act against reason and the instinct of self-preservation – crossing the boundaries of law and showing nonchalance instead of the expected submission. Not surprisingly then, Bigger inherits this quality to some extent.

Stanton finds in Wright's narrative the following argument: "to be a good person, one must first be a person; [...] to become a person one has to act; [...] the morality imposed upon Bigger confines him to shame-ridden non-existence by prohibiting any significant act – except crime" (1969: 56). I find his diagnosis accurate in all parts but one – it is not *morality* that ties Bigger down; it is the law embodying the *positive morality* of a racially prejudiced society.⁹ Weary of the inaction forced on him by law and custom, Bigger considers felony. Stanton terms these instances "fancies of power" (1969: 53), as if crossing legal boundaries could compensate for disenfranchisement:

They had the feeling that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of the ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose

⁹ Stanton pursues his argument from a starting point marked by what he calls (in rather general terms) "moral law", equating the concept with "traditional Christian ethics" (1969: 53). A detailed explanation of what he means by *morality*, based either on ethics or jurisprudence, is missing from his analysis. Consequently, he misses the contradiction between *morality* as defined by Naturalists and *positive morality* and fails to notice that the situation of Black Americans of the post-slavery era was unique because great moral ambivalence was allowed into the system by the law itself.

upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white's world's rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to. (1940: 18)

Wright uses the territory metaphor to stress that robbing a white shop owner is, apart from violating the criminal code, an offense against social norms. Hence, "trespassing into the White world" signifies crossing the metaphorical barrier erected to strengthen the psychological sense of inferiority the segregation laws produced in African-Americans.

Interestingly, when the boys abandon the plan of robbing Blum, it is for fear of the vigilante justice of his gun rather than of legal sanctions. Statutory punishments in the America of the 1930's were harsh (especially for interracial offences); still, the criminal-justice system operated within fixed boundaries. There were no limits, however, to extrajudicial or self-defense measures, all likely to escape prosecution. The fear of white men's violent responses is the novel's main theme: Bigger is motivated by it throughout the entire plot, particularly when he smothers Mary. All the crimes he commits afterwards have a mark of practical reasoning in the detachment of his humane self that, nevertheless, exists. Explaining to Max the exhilarating effect the acts had upon him, Bigger admits: "For a while I was free. I was doing something. It was wrong, but I was feeling all right" (1940: 328). Similar to his prototypes from "How 'Bigger' Was Born," he finds freedom in crossing legal and moral boundaries:

Had he done what they thought he never could? His being black and at the bottom of the world was something which he could take with a new born strength. [...] The feeling of being always enclosed in the stifling embrace of an invisible force had gone from him. [...] His body felt free and easy now. (1940: 141-2)

In other words, the crimes are Bigger's way out of the inertia forced on him by customs, and, as many *Native Son* scholars claim, they have a defining significance. Butler, for instance,

sees the killings as a way of achieving independence in a reality marked by economic, social and political exclusion (1984: 103). Also Brivic notes that the killings and their aftermath result in a phenomenal change in Bigger: “He has gone from slave to master, from a complete social liability to a dynamic managerial executive” (1974: 235). He writes about “regeneration through violence” (1974: 235) and suggests that the savage means of Bigger’s rebirth directly reflect the brutal reality of the post-slavery era (1974: 237). While I agree with Brivic on the direction of the change in Bigger, I differ on what triggered the crimes. I claim that it is not only the opportunity to reenact the physical violence inflicted on his people that has a purifying effect on Bigger. Crossing the conceptual boundary delineated by the codes in order to defy the psychological oppression of morally ambivalent law is, at least, equally significant.

9. Conclusion

Summing up, law is a fundamental point of reference in Western culture: what is allowed or forbidden is stipulated in statutes which reflect society’s prejudices and customs. The metaphorical line between the concepts of lawfulness and lawlessness posited in legislative acts creates a conceptual boundary demarcating the territory for potential action. Law, as a goal-oriented instrument of governance, at times fails to provide an even-handed standard for all its subjects, creating tension between the individual and the system. Wright’s *Native Son* is a remarkable example of such a conflict. Under the rule of the Jim Crow laws, justified by a positive morality grounded in racial prejudice, Wright’s protagonist – Bigger Thomas – is deprived of his most fundamental natural rights: a sense of belonging and kinship, freedom of choice, and his humanness. Bigger’s growing frustration at his inert, locked-in existence leads him, therefore, to cross all boundaries and commit violent crimes.

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