roots.'[70] In interview, meanwhile, Toni Morrison has joined Walcott, declaring that she 'always hated with a passion when writers rewrote what black people said, in some kind of phonetic alphabet that was inapplicable to any other regional pronunciation'. Morrison continues by suggesting that, above the over-eager transformation of 'this' into 'dis' and 'that' into 'dat', and beyond the gimmicky abbreviation of the gerund, AAE's real spirit lies in 'the way words are put together, the metaphors, the rhythm, the music – that's the part of the language that is distinctly black to me when I hear it'.[71] Many reasons suggest that Richard Wright should have received the Nobel Prize for Literature that has more recently been bestowed on Morrison and Walcott. But perhaps the greatest is that his approach to black speech anticipates theirs, that *Native Son* pioneers a new method in Black Atlantic literature, which has lately acquired massive canonical acceptance.

Social determinism: an anti-American accent?

In early 1941, still swept up in *Native Son*'s immediate success, Richard Wright was visited by Robert E. Park, the octogenarian sociologist who had pioneered the Chicago School's focus on the survey of new and industrial urban landscapes. Though somewhat conservative, Park rose with the help of a walking stick to honour the revolutionary novelist. Inspecting Wright, scrutinizing him carefully, Park demanded of the novelist: 'How in the hell did you happen?'[72]

Park's enquiry, the impatient manner in which he insists that the source of his disorientation explain his disorientation away, suggests that Wright is upsetting his assumption that certain social conditions produce certain human personalities. Park seems to feel that the success of this young, gifted and black artist violates some invisible but vital anthropological code. This feeling, however, forces a problem to the surface. Tactless as it is, Park's question envisions a relationship between the individual and society not so distant from that which *Native Son* offers. Park's deterministic world view – his feeling that certain contexts make certain personalities 'happen' – was obviously confounded by Wright's illustrious career, but it was just as obviously supported by the work that this unclassifiable novelist produced. At the very least, *Native Son* intimates that Bigger does not choose his crimes so much as they choose him. An atmosphere of inevitability pervades his every move.

> It was all over. He had to save himself. But it was familiar, this running away. All his life he had been knowing that sooner or later something like this would come to him. And now, here it was. He had always felt outside of this white world, and now it was true. It made things simple. He felt in his shirt. Yes; the gun was still there. He might have to use it.
> ('Flight', p. 251)

70 Derek Walcott, 'A Letter to Chamoiseau' in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), pp. 213–32 (pp. 228–9).
71 Toni Morrison, *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), p. 96.
72 [...] *The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), p. 250.

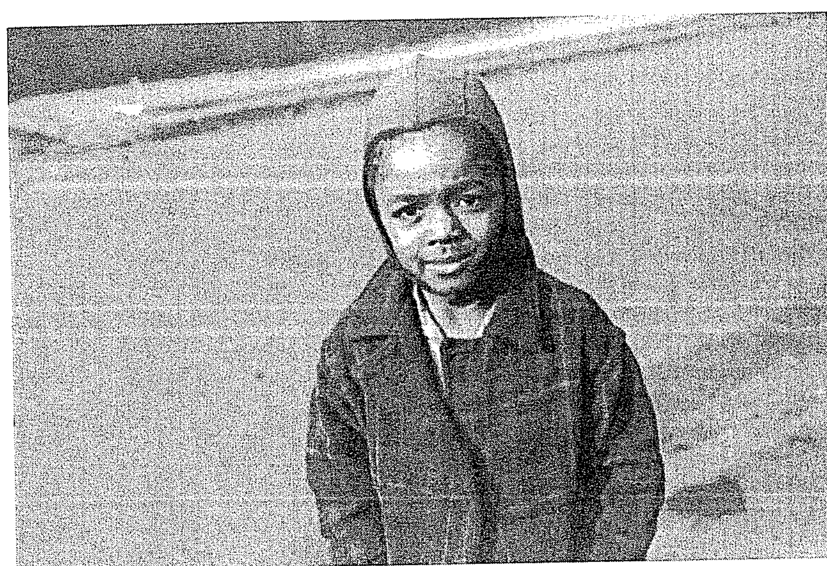

Figure 6 Street urchin, Black Belt, Chicago, Illinois. Photograph: Edwin Rosskam, 1941.

Passages such as these present Bigger's predicament as little more than the culmination of a set of forces beyond his control. Lost on the white rooftops, aware that the police are closing in on him, Bigger here realizes that he is helpless. As clearly as those readers who know that *Native Son* wants to deny us the 'consolation of tears', he realizes that his fate is preordained. Such passages reinforce the unmistakable implication of the novel overall, confirming that, in this harsh and brutal ghetto environment, Bigger's criminality is likely – and perhaps even guaranteed – to occur.

At the same time, though, the passage implies the corollary of this deterministic ethos. Its insistence on the likelihood of Bigger's criminality amounts to a complementary insistence on the unlikelihood that this unpromising ghetto could allow air to reach an autodidact such as Wright. Put another way, Ralph Ellison's famous observation that 'Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright', although intended as an attack of the novel, actually calls attention to one of its most important and deliberate effects: the fact that its anti-hero's imaginative scope is narrowed, not by Wright, but by American society itself.[73] Effectively, then, *Native Son* takes Robert Park's question and turns it full circle. It asks: how in the hell *couldn't* Bigger happen?

Native Son's determinism, its decision to deprive Bigger of agency, results from Wright's close reading of the key texts not only of American sociology but also of literary realism and Marxism. What these intellectual traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shared was a broad belief that social

73 Ralph Ellison, 'The World and the Jug', in *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, pp. 1578–99 (p. 1583).

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or economic hierarchies work to limit free will and to produce certain types of individuals. In literary realism, the narratives that this belief spawned tend to contextualize the moral degeneration of a given protagonist and to attribute it to broad social forces. Though Dostoevsky himself repeatedly dramatized the desensitization and corruption of the individual by industrial society, this investment in social or economic causality is even clearer in the work of Émile Zola, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser and those other novelists who practised the more systematic and apparently scientific form of realism that Zola, for one, called naturalism. Often casting human beings as cogs in a social machine that lies beyond their comprehension or control, naturalism's classic texts such as Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1896) and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) exhibit a more forceful determinism in which objects and commodities – machines, goods, property, even cities – make choices on behalf of human beings. In the early 1930s, according to Hazel Rowley, such works were already making Wright wonder how 'would Zola, Dreiser and Crane write about the South Side? He wanted to apply their seemingly impartial naturalistic techniques to depict the daily lives of black people. But he was serving a bewildering apprenticeship, without a guide or fellow writer in sight.'[74]

Isolation was not the only thing that made Wright's apprenticeship bewildering. Its sheer expansiveness, the astonishing impetus that led Wright into as many intellectual spheres as possible, presented other challenges. In the years leading up to *Native Son*, even as he read the major works of literary realism, Wright somehow found time to digest the major writings of the Marxist-Leninist tradition. In this revolutionary canon he encountered the more doctrinaire and far simpler determinism that Friedrich Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880) called historical materialism and defined as an insistence that 'the ultimate causes of all social changes . . . are to be sought, not in men's brains, . . . but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the *philosophy*, but in the *economics* of each particular epoch.'[75] Defining individuals entirely by their relationship to the economy – or, in the Marxist vocabulary, to the means of production – such materialism installs class as the overriding factor. Not only does it insist that one's membership to the proletariat, bourgeoisie or aristocracy completely cancels out the power of individual 'free will'; it actively discredits this latter concept altogether, recasting it as a convenient myth by which the privileged insist that they deserve their privilege.

Wright's apprenticeship ran further. On the shelves of the several dour South Side apartments he rented in the 1930s, such leftist tracts as Karl Marx's *Capital* (1867–83), John Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power* (1939) and even Joseph Stalin's *The National and Colonial Question* (1936) variously pressed against studies produced by the Chicago School of Sociology. If anything, the latter influenced the young writer more profoundly. As he later recalled:

> The huge mountains of fact piled up by the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago gave me my first concrete vision of the forces

74 Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, p. 250.
75 Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (London: Bookmarks, 1993), p. 87.

> that molded the urban Negro's body and soul. (I was never a student at the university; it is doubtful if I could have passed the entrance examination.) . . .
>
> [The] men most responsible for this . . . were not afraid to urge their students to trust their feelings for a situation or an event, were not afraid to stress the role of insight . . . Scientific volumes brilliantly characterized by insight . . . Louis Wirth's *The Ghetto* [1928], Everett Stonequist's *The Marginal Man* [1937], . . . [and Robert] Park's and [Ernest] Burgess's *The City* [1925].[76]

Here and elsewhere, Wright punctuates his appreciation of such sociological research with the verb 'to mould'. The effect of this repetition, as it choruses through Wright's prose, casts society as a kind of sculptor and the individual as his clay. Some form of determinism accordingly comes to seem integral to the 'truth' that this sociological canon revealed to Wright. And indeed, while many of this canon's authors revised or rejected the historical materialism of orthodox Marxism, it is true that the three major intellectual traditions exposed to Wright in these years – literary realism, Marxism and sociology – overlapped with each other considerably. Sociology originated in the Marxist concept of 'human reality', according to the leading theorist of our own time Zygmunt Bauman; literary realism constitutes 'the central model of Marxist aesthetics', according to Fredric Jameson; and *Native Son*, in turn, mouths the causality common to all, presenting Bigger, in Robert Bone's words, as 'a human being whose environment has made him incapable of relating meaningfully to other human beings except through murder'.[77] *Native Son* in this way digests these distinct but interrelated intellectual traditions, all three of which originated in Europe, and applies their common determinism to the altered sphere of the black ghetto. It affirms that, here, no less than in the Lancashire factories Engels studied or the French mines Zola depicted, people are made more than they make themselves.

Wright was aided in this endeavour by a handful of sociological works that, as his autobiography puts it, directly 'bore upon the causes of my conduct and the conduct of my family'.[78] Black academics' studies, and chiefly E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) and Horace Cayton and St Clair Drake's *Black Metropolis* (1946), concentrated on milieux very like that of *Native Son*. They, too, address the problems ghettoization made endemic: family breakdown, delinquency, unemployment, poverty, addiction, violence. Wright was particularly enthusiastic about the second of these texts, the *Black Metropolis* title of which was Cayton and Drake's way of referring to the Chicago South Side, that ghettoized 'city within a city' whose kitchenettes, factories, bars, cafeterias and libraries Wright knew so well.[79] In an admiring introduction to the landmark text, Wright noted:

76 Richard Wright, 'Introduction' in Horace R. Cayton and St Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), pp. xvii–xxxiv (pp. xviii–xix).
77 References are respectively to Zygmunt Bauman, *Society under Siege* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p. 1; Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 90; and Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, p. 151.
78 Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, p. 327.
79 Cayton and Drake, *Black Metropolis*, p. 12.

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> *Black Metropolis* pictures the environment out of which the Bigger Thomases of our nation come. . . . If, in reading my novel, *Native Son*, you doubted the reality of Bigger Thomas, then examine the delinquency rates cited in this book; if, in reading my autobiography, *Black Boy*, you doubted the picture of family life shown there, then study the figures on family disorganization given here. *Black Metropolis* describes the processes that mold Negro life as we know it today, processes that make the majority of Negroes on Chicago's South Side sixth-graders, processes that make 65 percent of all Negroes on Chicago's South Side earn their living by manual labor.[80]

Again, here, Wright's appraisal calls attention to the underlying determinism of sociological methodology, repeats the verb 'to mould' and its implied inevitability, and so envisions a city where omnipotent social forces swamp human will. *Black Metropolis* is thus presented as a post-facto vindication of *Native Son*; the considerable generic divergence between the two, Wright suggests, masks an affinity of intellectual purpose.

Wright's other commentaries on *Native Son* sustain this approach. They, too, often protect his incendiary novel against attack by cloaking its fictional qualities in the camouflage of verifiable fact: sociological statistics, direct observation, empirical insights. Thus, just as *Black Metropolis* intersperses its statistical analyses with illustrative case studies of individual South Side residents, 'How "Bigger" Was Born' lists a number of men Wright knew who, labelled as 'Bigger No. 1' and '2', etc., corroborate his anti-hero's brutish nihilism and pre-empt the

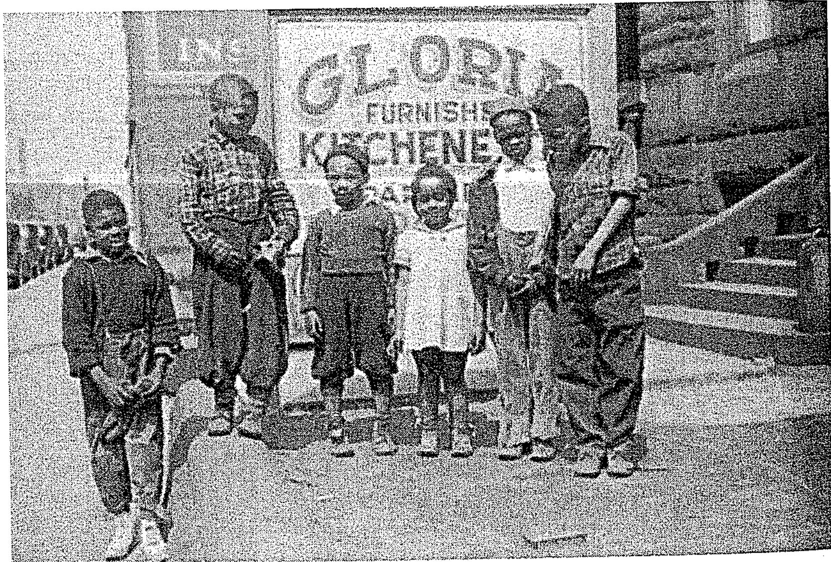

Figure 7 Untitled. Photograph: Edwin Rosskam, 1941.

80 Wright, 'Introduction' in *Black Metropolis*, pp. xviii–xx.

charge of sensationalism. As Wright's exploration of this composite personality unfolds, Bigger comes to seem a figure lifted from the pages of classic Chicago sociology – to seem the product, indeed, of another 'mould':

> But why did Bigger revolt? No explanation based upon a hard and fast rule of conduct can be given. But there were always two factors psychologically dominant in his personality. First, through some quirk of circumstance, he had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race. Second, he was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life. In many respects his emergence as a distinct type was inevitable.[81]

On one level, this essay's title, 'How "Bigger" Was Born', confirms Wright's continuing commitment to the social determinism of his intellectual sources. Far removed from a romantic paradigm in which characters are dreamt or spring unfettered from the authorial unconscious, Bigger is here the product of a rational, explicable process, his 'birth' remaining in this sense 'inevitable'. But on another level, the more digressive path by which Wright's rhetoric inches towards this restatement of the 'inevitable' occasions an attempt to modify determinism and to force it to accommodate the complex varieties of experience that the 'dominant civilization' produces. What Fredric Jameson would later call the 'billiard-ball causality' by which Engels straightforwardly explained class consciousness and by which Crane straightforwardly depicted Maggie's moral descent, having thus fallen into Wright's hands, now gets bent and distorted into a less linear and less elegant but much more lifelike system.[82]

For what these modifications do is present Bigger no longer as the automatic product of the ghetto per se but of the fact that, for him, its characteristic conditions have fallen into a particularly bad configuration. Qualifications and notes of uncertainty, the opening dismissal of easy 'explanation' and the later admission of 'quirk[s] of circumstance', are as such readable as signs of Wright's growing disenchantment with orthodox historical materialism and of his retrospective desire to emphasize those moments when *Native Son*, though written under the sign of Marxism, departs from the oversimplified linearity of its deterministic model. Put another way, Ellison was right to grasp that 'Wright could imagine Bigger, but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright. Wright saw to that.'[83] To Wright's mind, however, this famous critical statement is more of an observation than an attack. For the American ghetto in *Native Son*'s formulation, clearly, can imagine both: can push one frustrated young man through the doors of the George Cleveland Hall, and another into a drunk white woman's bedroom.

For all these modifications, however, for all Wright's eventual repudiation of a simplistic Marxist analysis that 'gyrates and squirms to make the Negro problem

81 Wright, 'How "Bigger" Was Born', pp. 5–8.
82 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 10.
83 Ralph Ellison, 'The World and the Jug', in *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, pp. 1578–99 (p. 1583).

fit rigidly into a class-war frame of reference', this clearly remains a form of social determinism.[84] It is one thing to exercise free will. It is quite another to succumb to the multifarious 'quirk[s] of circumstance' that push Bigger into this lethal bedroom and from it into the electric chair. For all that this passage from 'How "Bigger" Was Born' complicates traditional Marxist determinism, its conclusion remains that keyword, 'inevitable'. Its equation, at root, still suggests that Bigger's ghetto life will in time equal criminality.

This beautifully simple equation, in turn, still repels many American and Americanized readers. It still offends those committed to an American interpretation of democracy in which capitalism and Christianity intertwine to create the impression that anyone can rise from rags to riches, that even Bigger could transcend his unpromising circumstances to make himself anew. Many men and women who have otherwise felt dazzled by *Native Son*'s outraged brilliance have found it hard to countenance its un-American, even anti-American, permutations. Paul Green, the white southerner who adapted *Native Son* for the stage, voiced the classic objection:

> Bigger Thomas . . . was practically completely a product of his environment; and I wouldn't subscribe to that. A human being has got some responsibility for his career; and I don't care what Freud says or what whining people say, you can't put [the blame] on somebody else. . . . Bigger Thomas must, in my version, become conscious of the fact that he himself was partly responsible for his own character and what that character did.[85]

Today, Green's insistence on individual responsibility attracts widespread consensus throughout the Americanized world. The belief in social determinism that Green found so repellent and subsequently erased from his theatrical version of the novel is likewise spurned nationally and internationally. One example of this consensus is the disdain that the War on Terror's leading strategists express for the kind of 'nation-building' pioneered by an earlier generation of American politicians; their rhetoric focuses much more on the need to restore individual responsibility to such war-torn states as Afghanistan and Iraq. Another example is that present historians of slavery often seem far more comfortable when chronicling instances of slave resistance than when attending to those who, institutionalized and deprived of agency by the slave-holding system, internalized racial inferiority and submitted to the whims of their masters. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this consensus – and whatever the merits of Wright's countervailing determinism – *Native Son* clearly cuts against the grain of twenty-first-century American culture. Where Wright emphasizes social pressures and 'moulds', this culture emphasizes free will. Where he places responsibility in the society as a whole, it places responsibility in the individual. And where he sees inevitability, it sees guilt.

84 Wright, 'Introduction' in *Black Metropolis*, p. xxix.
85 Quoted in Judith Giblin Brazinsky (1984) 'The Demands of Conscience and the Imperatives of Form: The Dramatization of *Native Son*', *Black American Literature Forum*, 18(3): pp. 106–9 (pp. 106–7).

But against all this – and here the nuances multiply further, and paradoxes proliferate – Wright hardly intended *Native Son* to be anti-democratic. Paul Green's criticism of the novel effectively blames its denial of individual responsibility on Wright himself and so sidesteps Wright's clear belief that such determinism actually resulted from American ghetto conditions. Green, in Wright's terms, thus blames the messenger, blames *Native Son* for the very oppression it critiques. For in the final analysis what the sociological, Marxist and literary realist traditions share is not only a desire to prove the existence of a deterministic social dynamic but also the secretly democratic and libertarian hope that by doing so they will begin to dismantle it. Crane no more welcomed Maggie's descent into prostitution and eventual suicide than Engels lauded the bourgeois infatuation with profit or Cayton and Drake hailed the family's disintegration in *Black Metropolis*. Implicit in their critiques, in fact, is a quintessentially American belief in individual freedom and horror at its curtailment by social inequity. The rebellious offspring of such divergent traditions, *Native Son* is equally appalled by the lack of choice that it concentrates into Bigger's melodramatic cry: 'What I killed for, I *am*!' ('Fate', p. 453). *Native Son* is horrified by the erosion of individual freedom; it not only identifies but also decries a determinism nowadays more often disparaged than understood.

Bigger: silenced by whiteness?

Racism goes to great lengths to simplify humanity. It is an ideology that seeks to pigeonhole the world – to place humankind into neat and orderly compartments. But this is also an ideology vexed by humanity's refusal to sit neatly within such compartments. It is an ideology confused by the evidence placed before it. The prospect of someone in whom the 'races mix', the discovery of affinities between us – such ordinary incidents spell crisis to racist thought. They force it in on itself, compelling it to deride those of 'mixed' identity, to deny interracial empathy and, generally, to come up with ever-more complicated justifications for its simple view of the world.

Ku Klux Klansmen's robes are a good example of this ideology's tendency towards paradox. Bleached to perfection, the whiteness of these robes after all illustrates nothing so much as the 'flaws' of human skin. Flagging up the pinkness of the Klansmen's skin, revealing their tragic inability to achieve their perfect hue, it illustrates that white people are not really white. Not only extremists, however, but general Western cultures remain prone to this kind of paradox. As Richard Dyer points out in his extremely readable *White* (1997), the agreed language by which we talk about race today likewise forgets that particular racial groupings are not 'really of one hue'; it, too, obscures the fact that whiteness is 'a matter of ascription – white people are who white people say are white'.[86]

Richard Wright seems to have anticipated some of the findings of Dyer's important study. For example, in 1955 he travelled to Indonesia, there attending the Bandung Conference of the African, American and Asian countries that had

86 Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 48.