

ASSERTING BLACK AMERICAN SELF-DIRECTEDNESS IN WRIGHT'S WORKS: A STUDY OF *UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN*, *NATIVE SON* AND *BLACK BOY*, Serge Lazare OUEDRAOGO (Université Norbert Zongo de Koudougou - BF)
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Abstract

Between 1935 and 1945, a period of intense racial segregation in the United States (US), black Americans' lives were marked by the denial of their selfhood and the restriction of their self-directedness or free movement. Literature was part of the struggling tools they used to recover and assert their existence as free individuals. This paper analyzes black Americans' quest for self-directedness in Wright's novels, mainly in *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, in such an American context of racial oppression and alienation. Reverting to Jacques Derrida and Félix Guattari's philosophical concepts of de-territorialization and re-territorialization, the paper shows that although oppression and alienation are all the rage in their fictional world, Wright's protagonists carry out de-territorializing and re-territorializing strategies to break away from their prevailing social and spiritual alienation and enter their own world of self-directedness.

Keywords: Richard Wright; Black Americans; self-directedness; de-territorialization; re-territorialization

L’AFFIRMATION DE L’AUTODÉTERMINATION PERSONNELLE DES NOIRS AMÉRICAINS DANS LES ŒUVRES DE RICHARD WRIGHT : ETUDE DE *UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN*, *NATIVE SON* ET *BLACK BOY*

Résumé

Entre 1935 et 1945, période marquée par une ségrégation raciale aiguë aux États-Unis, la vie des Noirs Américains était marquée par la négation de leur personnalité et la restriction de leur auto-détermination personnelle. La littérature fut l'un des moyens de lutte utilisés par ces Noirs Américains pour recouvrer et affirmer leur existence en tant qu'individus libres. Cet article analyse la quête d'auto-détermination personnelle des Noirs Américains dans les œuvres de Richard Wright, en l'occurrence *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son* et *Black Boy*, dans un contexte d'oppression et d'aliénation raciales. En faisant recours aux concepts philosophiques deleuziens de déterritorialisation et de reterritorialisation, l'article montre que bien l'oppression et l'aliénation étaient en plein essor dans leurs mondes fictifs respectifs, les personnages principaux de Wright déploient des stratégies de déterritorialisation et de reterritorialisation en vue de se libérer de leur aliénations sociale et spirituelle pour jouir d'un monde d'autodétermination personnelle.

Mots clés : Richard Wright ; Noirs Américains ; autodétermination ; déterritorialisation ; reterritorialisation

Introduction

Whether in *Uncle Tom's Children* (UTC), *Native Son* (NS) or *Black Boy* (BB), Wright depicts the lives of black characters who are oppressed and deprived of free movement. The Black Belt separating Whites and Blacks is ubiquitous in the

three novels where Blacks' lives are controlled, censored and alienated to keep them from growing into free human beings. Wright not only depicts this painful plight but also removes the black subject from alienation to a self-directed human being. Self-directedness can be understood as a personality trait which permits the individual to adapt or adjust and face any situation triggered by social forces so as to reach an objective or value which has been personally chosen (C. Cloniger, D. Svrakic, T. Przybeck, 1993). But how do Wright's protagonists recover and express their self-directedness in the context of racial oppression?

J. Howland points to the protagonist's quest for soul making "so that it possesses its own irreducible uniqueness" (1986, p.118), but he does not make any fixation on how his soul endows him with self-directedness. J. Thaddeus (1985) suggests the protagonist metamorphoses his "feeling, [which] enables him to create a firm setting for his reliable self" (p.199), but it would be critically rewarding to examine such a metamorphosis further to show where it exactly leads the protagonist to, namely self-directedness. While T. Shelby's (2012) analysis of *UTC* shows how Wright's oppressed protagonists build their own ethics he terms "Ethics of Uncle Tom's Children" (p.514), it should further be noted that building ethics outside the national ethical canon bears no significant result unless it allows them to direct themselves as free individuals. R.J. Butler (1986) also contends, to recover his own self, Bigger, the protagonist in *NS*, builds his own murderous ethics, but his fate is "the inevitable road leading to the electric chair" (p.18). However, Butler seems to lose sight of Bigger's spiritual self-directedness which follows his murder before he is sentenced to death.

To highlight how self-directed identity is shaped and asserted, I intend to scan through Wright's three novels and showcase that all the protagonists use de-territorializing and re-territorializing strategies to break away from oppression, recover and express themselves as self-directed individuals. In this vein, I will fall back on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophical concepts of "de-territorialization" and "re-territorialization." From a Deleuzian and Guattarian perspective, de-territorialization consists for marginalized individuals in deconstructing or contesting a physical or non-physical territory to create within it a new one with new standards or identity. The establishment of the new standards or identity is referred to as re-territorialization (G. Deleuze; F. Guattari 1983). De-territorialization and re-territorialization allow the marginalized individual to "bring about another consciousness and sensibility" (G. Deleuze; F. Guattari, 1983, p.17), by building and asserting a self-directed identity.

In the course of my analysis, Wright's writing as a means of repositioning the self through deterritorialization will first be examined. Then I will analyze self-consciousness and individual metamorphosis as consequences of this repositioning of the self and, finally, I will unravel the way a self-conscious and metamorphosed individual achieves bodily and spiritual freedom.

1.Repositioning the Self Through De-territorialization

By embracing writing through special and pragmatic language, Wright distinguishes himself from other black Americans by taking control of his self to guide it according to his own beliefs and perceptions. While others indulge in

lamentation and self-devaluation as a result of what the hostile white environment has imposed on them, Wright regains all his self-confidence and has no complex in expressing his own value. To show it, he uses Richard as a mouthpiece in *BB*:

Well, I had never felt my place, or rather, my deepest instincts had always made me reject the place to which the white South had assigned to me. It had never occurred to me that I was in any way an inferior being. And no word that I had ever heard fall from the lips of southern white men had ever really made me doubt the worth of my own humanity. (p.283)

These words bear witness to the new self-determination that Wright's individuality has given him. While Wright seems not to necessarily believe in the possibility of full liberation in *NS* as Bigger is eventually sentenced to death, he believes it is possible in *BB* through de-territorializing doings such as reading and writing (R. Makombe, 2013, p.294).

It could be paradoxical to say that reading and writing are de-territorializing acts regarding the individual and collective self-awakening that they can entail. Yet in the fictional context of *BB*, reading and writing are supposed to be the prerogatives of the dominant class. Therefore, it is forbidden for the dominated group to read and write. Such an interdiction is meant to prevent them from discovering self-consciousness and self-directedness. Since the protagonist, Richard, belongs to the dominated social group, his stubbornness in reading and writing can be considered as de-territorializing because his action is conflicting with the established social norms. That is why Richard's wanting to read and write is hindered by white librarians and even his own family members such as Granny who has internalized the idea that his reading and writing are not only conflicting with white social prescriptions but also with her Adventist faith (*BB*, p.186-187). *BB* traces the path to freedom and self-realization and Richard's flight to the North symbolizes the quest for self-direction which is achieved through his own imagination. Now that imagination is not conditioned by anyone else but his own self, everything becomes possible in Richard's words:

Anything seemed possible, likely, feasible because I wanted everything to be possible [...]. Because I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen within. Because my environment was bare and bleak, I endowed it with unlimited potentialities, redeemed for the sake of my own hungry and cloudy yearning. (*BB*, p.81-83)

While the real and objective world remains under the dominant group's control, Richard takes control over the imaginative world as a free self and redeems his hunger for self-direction. And because Richard is self-directed, he takes power over his imaginary environment and directs it according to his own yearnings. Self-directedness really enables him to reach full humanity or personhood resulting from his ontological metamorphosis.

In the social and societal frameworks in which the self-directed individual is inscribed, he/she is able to propose another location and positioning. While oppressed minorities are initially pushed to the margins and boundaries of social life, those who rebel and create a free self can then denounce the process of marginalization and boundaries set for them not to cross. The self-directed individual no longer abides by the dominant group's traditional positioning of him/her in the

margin. That is the case with Richard who re-territorializes the dominant group's territory and privileges working and reading which are considered the prerogatives of the dominant group. In *BB*, Richard goes further than reading and embraces writing, a realm where he is able to freely tell his own stories as though to suggest that he has escaped from letting others tell his own story. Richard's breakthroughs in writing and reading correspond to Wright's real-life experience as he embraces autobiography which is one of the best literary tools to tell more exactly one's own story.

One can agree that autobiography in the United States was a purely white tradition, but Wright appropriates it as a means of resistance which enables him to denounce the prevailing social plight and to shape black subjectivity against an oppressive environment. Once Wright elbows his way out of the oppressive social and political environment, he succeeds in positioning himself in a way to repossess his own linguistic and artistic place where he fights against oppression. L. Demirtürk (2005) carries this idea further insisting on the role of Wright's autobiography in recovering the self-directed individual in the dispossessing environment. In L. Demirtürk's perception of *BB*, this autobiography enables the oppressed group to situate its personal preferences within the larger social and political contexts and to offer an alternative discourse to de-territorialize stereotypes and misconceptions. He further contends "Wright's representation of the black subject's formation reconstructs his social location [...] as the black boy subverts the white authority by entering the social discourse he has never been admitted to" (2005, p.272). While entering the social discourse they have been excluded from, the oppressed individuals are moving from the captivity to the center, which is an expression of self-directedness. This is mirrored in *UTC* where Big Boy and his comrades direct themselves from the town's margins and walk to the center by reaching Jim's private swimming pool (p.29). In *NS*, Bigger escapes from the grip of social neglect by directing himself into the center of public gaze thanks to his murder. In *BB*, Richard resists domestic marginalization and places himself at the center of public attention thanks to his rebellious attitude towards racial separatism.

In refusing to abide by the principles of racial separatism, Richard finds himself in a middle position. He can perceive his own self as standing in the borderline of white and black culture (M. Maaloum, 2014, p.2-4). Wright himself undergoes the same situation as he experiences a kind of cultural hybridity vastly characterized by fragmentation, heterogeneity and difference. Wright fights hard to escape from the grip of black and white cultures and this enables him not to reject others simply because of their difference. His recovery of the self-directed individual leads him to refuse to behave like black nationalists who also reject Whites as different, and in order to get his message across, he excels in fighting against racism as a hybrid individual carrying black and white features. In Wright's positioning as a hybrid being, it is proved that racial hegemony is not possible as supported by Jacques Derrida's concept of fragmentation. J. Derrida (1976, p.142) suggests meaning is the result of a constant process of competing interpretations, delving it into permanent evolution or *différance*. Racism does not escape from Derrida's concept of fragmentation. Just as meaning in general is always fragmented and in a process of constant evolutions, so are the meaning of race and racial domination.

One's perception of race is different from another's according to one's geographical and cultural origins, which suggests that race is a cultural construction and therefore cannot have a universal meaning. And because the meaning of race is not universal, race cannot be used as a reason for oppression. While Whites pretend to be dominating inferior races by keeping them in their places, Bigger and Gus, as free selves in *NS*, can still de-territorialize white domains by playing white (*NS*, p.30). They make use of their knowledge about white ways to re-territorialize them to their advantage without Whites discovering it:

Playing white, Bigger and Gus [...] create mobility and action which are denied to them by the condition of poverty and subjection in the black side of the town. Their performance enacted in terms of their resemblance to or difference from white people does not only grant them political access spheres of privilege and powers exclusive to Whites but also positions them as hybrid and in-between subjects who inhabit the borderline which is marked by racial mixing and contamination and against which whiteness and blackness define themselves as essentialist and pure modes of identification. (M. Maaloum, 2014, p.241)

As it is implied, the play leads Bigger and Gus into the white world through fantasy while keeping their black selfhood safe. This is also a kind of hybridity which enables them to reject the domination of whiteness over blackness, which, in turn, is a form of de-territorialization of the stability of racial identity. In a few words, hybridity is used by Blacks as a tool to manipulate white stereotypes and to achieve clandestine selfhood. This is perceptible in Bigger's behavior after his murdering of Mary Dalton. While playing the shy and innocent boy, Bigger uses these white stereotypes to manipulate them as blind men according to his personal interests. As M. Maaloum (2014, p.248) states: "After killing Mary, he learns to vacate his place of subjection in the white order and liberate himself from the prison of his corporal visibility by fooling whites, acting like they want and expect him to, while using and manipulating their blindness to his advantage." Acting like a body without organs, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's term, Bigger succeeds in manipulating Whites who ignore he can act as a subject. The concept of "Body without Organs" (BwO) was developed by Deleuze and Guattari in their deconstructionist works. The body without organs has no tongue, no teeth, no larynx, no eye, no stomach, and no anus. It is the individual who constructs the body and puts on the organs he wishes. Depriving the body of organs is not tantamount to killing it, but it is all about opening it to connections made of various agencies. When the body has no original organ, it enables the user of the body to add organs which act according to his objectives. For example, if I add a mouth, it will speak the words I put in it, which places me in control of the spoken speech. Bigger can be initially seen as a "Body without Organs" until he adds some that act according to his own self-will and empowers him to get his full worth and give meaning to his selfhood. Killing Mr. Dalton's daughter, Mary, gives him the advantage of seeing society without being seen (M. Maaloum, 2014, p.256-257). In such circumstances, instead of being supervised, Bigger becomes the manipulator and supervisor of the Daltons' family which becomes a site of freedom for the self-directed being he has become (M. Maaloum, 2014, p.262). From the moment Bigger is able to manipulate the Daltons' family, one can, henceforth, recognize he has created his real self just like Richard who has

already made precocious difference among his fellow young boys in terms of creating genuine self. As Y. Hakutani (1985, p.74) wrote, "He created selfhood and exerted his will at the risk of annihilation." However, it should be noted that while Bigger uses murder to create his true self, Richard mostly uses language, that J. Poulos (1997) terms «bad language», to build his selfhood despite all the hellish pressure from the oppressive environment. The bad language Jennifer Poulos talks about is the language which does not conform to social, moral and cultural expectations. When Richard asks Granny to kiss his ass after she finishes washing him, he suffers a hard blow because this speech is not expected to come from the mouth of a young boy (*BB*, p.49). In this respect, bad language is a re-territorialization of prevailing family or community values. Richard uses bad language to challenge some black American community values such as violent home education. Despite his violent environment, Richard keeps on his way to self-directedness:

The most painful stance he took in his struggle was to be an intense individualist. [...] In scene after scene, both the black and the white community kept piling crushing circumstances upon him, but no matter how were how unbearably they were pressed down on him he refused to give in. Only under such pressure can one discover one's self. (Y. Hakutani, 1985, p.74)

Richard, just like his counterparts in *NS* and *UTC*, is determined to keep his selfhood against all odds. No matter how different the strategies of Wright's characters are, one important thing which unifies them is the recovery of the self-directed being which endows all of them with self-consciousness and metamorphosis.

2. Self-Consciousness and Individual Metamorphosis

The liberation of the soul of the oppressed individual allows him/her to regain self-consciousness which is also free from all external influences and, at the same time, contributes to the building of the self-directed being. From the moment the individual regains a free soul, he/her discovers his/her true identity. The life of oppressed individuals is marked by oppressive forces which prevent them from possessing anything, including their conscience due to a whole ideology which challenges their thoughts and actions. By persevering in de-territorialization, Wright's oppressed characters manage to re-territorialize this trend by challenging the oppressive ideology in order to forge a free and autonomous conscience.

The author, in a sense, allows his main character Richard to free himself from the chains of oppression and determine himself in relation to his social environment, just as exactly explained by K. Wilhite (1999, p.105):

By disrupting the reproduction of oppressive relations, the narrator [...] creates a sense of authentic consciousness, [...] halts the interpellative process of ideological apparatuses that attempt to ensnare him, and interpellates a new kind of subject: the fully conscious, autonomous individual.

We could speak of a self-directed individual, someone who is, henceforth, conscious of his/her actions and shoulder their consequences with serenity. That is the case with Bigger who feels confident after killing Mr. Dalton's daughter and

Richard who is capable of withstanding the reactive forces that his behavior entails (J. Howland, 1986, p.101, 123). As the narrative reveals, Bigger's sense of being, self-awareness, self-worth and self-direction appear only after his de-territorializing act:

He felt that he had his destiny in his grasp. He was more alive than he could ever remember having been; his mind and attention were pointed, focused toward a goal. For the first time in his life he moved consciously between two sharply defined poles. He was moving away from the threatening penalty of death, from the dead-like times that brought him that tightness and hotness in his chest; and he was moving toward that sense of fullness he had so often inadequately felt in magazines and movies. (*NS*, p.129)

This passage really shows how self-directed Bigger becomes after his non-conformist act of killing Mary. He can freely move toward his destiny as a free individual and his self-worth and fullness are no longer inspired by movies and magazines but rather come true as part of his newly-acquired self-directed individuality. By the same token, Richard's newly found self-directed individuality in *BB* can be seen in his victory over the principal and his delivering his own valedictorian speech instead of the principal's (*BB*, p.196-197), which helps him consolidate his individuality. That is certainly why S.A. Smith (1992, p.130) contends that Richard's de-territorializing behavior permits him to resist and stay free from his alienating social environment:

This struggle is the struggle of the rebel who refuses to acquiesce in the conspiracy of this black family community, a microcosm of the community at large, to force him to deny his individuality and is, therefore, alienated completely from anything but his own self-consciousness.

From this point of view, anyone would agree with Wilhite that de-territorialization reveals to Richard the possibility of a struggle against oppressive conditions and allows him to achieve the self-consciousness and individuality he has been yearning for (Wilhite, 1999, p.115-119).

Re-territorialization allows some oppressed characters to express their individualities before dire circumstances which are only social creations aimed at imprisoning them in destitution and in the permanent need for social assistance. When one suggests that re-territorialization allows rebellious characters to emerge from dispossession to possession, it is not necessarily all about material or economic ownership. At the material and economic levels, rebellion does not, for example, make Richard and Bigger different from the other characters because they share almost the same deprivations, social conditions and dispossessing environment. Psychologically, morally and emotionally speaking, however, non-conformist characters who have forged their self-directed being feel very privileged after their acts. For example, after his murder, Bigger feels privileged compared to the other oppressed members of his family since he has personally found a new meaningful life, an unprecedented security, serenity and sense of superiority which are highlighted in one *NS* extract:

The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of

protection between him and the world he feared. He had murdered and has created a new life for himself. It was something that was his own, and it was for the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him. Yes, he could sit here calmly and eat and not be concerned about what his family thought or did. He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them. His crime was an anchor weighing safely in time: it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and knife did not. He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them; they were incapable of thinking he had done such a deed. And he had done something which even he did not think was possible. (*NS*, p.118-119)

Such a description of Bigger's mental state after his murder proves that he is now such a free being that he finds positive points in the murder of the dominant group's member despite all the risks of judicial lynching that his act foreshadows. One can also see the difference that Bigger as an individual maverick makes between himself and the other oppressed members of his family. While he discovers his own worth and potential in action, the other members of his family remain locked in ignorance and guided by their oppressive environment. Bigger's murder gives him a new status in his oppressive environment as it metamorphoses him from an alienated to a freely acting individual.

As Janice Thaddeus suggests, the arousal of the self-directed being is marked by the metamorphosis from a dispossessed self to a self-created one. De-territorialization and re-territorialization permit the oppressed individual,

to reach a plateau, a moment of resolution which allows him to recollect emotion in tranquility. This feeling enables him to create a firm setting for his reliable self, to see this self in relief against society or history, [...] moving undeviatingly from self-denial to self-discovery. [...] Richard Wright's *Black Boy* experienced such a metamorphosis. (J. Thaddeus, 1985, p.199)

Characters like Richard and Bigger usually begin with shyness and act as typical average individuals until they summon enough courage to challenge the oppressive social environment through unconventional means such as bad language and stealing as Richard does in *BB* (p.215), and murders as is the case for Bigger in *NS* (p.80-81).

It is undeniable that once those who are under oppression discover their own selves and full potentialities, they move from shy individuals to articulate ones, from motionless individuals to moving ones, from pointless subjectivity to meaningful one. In this respect, Thaddeus makes it clear that Wright's novels such as *UTC*, *NS* and *BB* are "molded and sharply beginning in speechlessness and anger, and ending in articulateness and hope" (J. Thaddeus, 1985, p.200). And, indeed, Sue moves from a submissive religious woman to a fully-committed communist in *UTC*; Richard shifts from a naïve child to a self-conscious teenager in *BB*, while Bigger goes from a naïve and shy boy to a bigger actor of social life in *NS*. As a general rule, the self-directed being who arouses from de-territorializing attitude reinserts the oppressed subject in his/her social milieu, which permits him/her to become a free body and soul.

3.The Achievement of Physical and Spiritual Freedom

Free movement is an important feature of the self-directed being, because no-one can be considered as a self-directed individual unless he can move freely around his environment. In Wright's three novels under study, all the non-conformist characters move from placeless and motionless individuals to fast-moving ones, which confirms the recovery of the self-directed individual. Movement frees the self-directed individual from oppression and allows him to go to better places where he can operate in the realm of universal freedom of speech and actions. As Robert Butler thinks, the freely moving individuals find in motion what is lost in space and, indeed, movement takes them "from a restricted past towards new possibilities" (R.J. Butler, 1986, p.7). This is evidenced in *UTC* where Big Boy escapes from lynching thanks to his prompt movement toward Chicago (p.50-53), and in *BB* where Richard immediately finds a home, love and a job just upon fleeing from Aunt Granny's dispossessing and oppressive family (p.231). Still, in *UTC*, movement allows Mann to escape from flooding (p.64-65), and Reverend Taylor and his community to oblige local authorities to provide them with social aid (p.178). It is true that the oppressed characters cannot move since they are supposed to be placeless, but those who rebel and recover their freedom of movement quit boredom and idleness and pose meaningful actions. Butler even goes further suggesting that motion endows the life of self-directed individuals with "vitality and meaning, transforming a dead road of routine into a dynamic world of beauty where the self can be transformed" (R.J. Butler, 1986, p.9). There is no doubt that the scenes following Richard's escape from his oppressive family environment are much more indicative of his recovered freedom and vitality:

Here Wright is outdoors, moving in a world of imaginative, physical and emotional freedom. Whereas in the previous scene [the one in which Richard is collectively assaulted by his family members], his consciousness was blocked by fear, he now relaxes and expands his sensibilities [...]. Significantly, [the narrative] is suffused with lyrical images of indefinite motion: horses clopping down a dusty road; Richard himself running through wed garden paths in the early morning; the Mississippi river winding past the bluffs of Natchez; wild geese flying South for the winter; a solidarity ant moving on 'a mysterious journey,' and 'vast hazes of gold' which 'washed eastward from star-heavy skies on silent nights.' (R.J. Butler, 1986, p.9)

Butler makes it clear that freedom of movement moves the self-directed individual out of stasis into open worlds of imagination and possibilities as symbolized by the lyrical images described in the narrative. As Butler further contends, "the implications of this startling juxtaposition of lyrical images are that creating a free self almost always generates emotional and spiritual freedom" (R.J. Butler, 1986, p.9), permitting to move from anonymity to visibility. Despite the diehard oppressors, such as Pease and Buckley, use violence to counter Richard and Bigger, the latter experiences such emotional and spiritual freedom and even a psychological transformation after the killing. Bigger is psychologically empowered even though he will face execution (M. Alzoubi, 2019, p.8), which implies that physical death cannot prevent emotional and spiritual freedom borne from irreversible self-directedness. As the narrative reveals Bigger's thoughts after his

crime, "There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it" (*NS*, p.94). In one word, Bigger's body has committed a de-territorializing act which frees his soul.

The status of the self-directed individual cannot be achieved without a soul which makes and defines itself individually without the influence of the visible world. However, since the visible world always influences the establishment of the free soul, the only way to shed this worldly influence and make a free soul is to embrace de-territorialization against the injunctions of the visible world. By re-territorializing the injunctions of the visible world into their own, most of Wright's protagonists manage to express their quest for an authentic soul free from spiritual dispossession by the visible world. Going through the path of their own territory, the oppressed individuals experience significant results in terms of combating the harmful forces of the visible world such as corruption, dispossession and alienation. And in achieving these results, the souls of Wright's characters take their liberty from visible attractive forces and degradation or disappearance and move towards the attainment of self-directed being. This reality features Wright's real life as Jacob Howland explains it at length. In analyzing Wright's quest for self-directed being, Howland shows the importance of Wright's soul and all the ups and downs it goes through to reach the free individual in soul and in flesh:

All souls confront corrupting and enslaving forces in the human world, and Wright's extreme experiences vividly display what sources of strength are needed to protect one's own powers and special gifts, and one's humanity in general, from dissipation and degeneration [...]. The book [*Black Boy*] is most fundamentally about the development of Wright's soul, and of the great passion which moves it, a passion which seems to respond to some powerful and sustaining source of alienation. (J. Howland, 1986, p.117)

It can be seen from Howland's analysis that Wright's work in general deals with the question of soul-making which is a process by which the individual finds himself in a bitter struggle to regain his freedom of movement in the spiritual as in the physical world. Wright cannot win this fight by blindly conforming to the human forces which threaten to dissipate or degenerate his individual talents, or simply his humanity. Thanks to his passion and determination, he recovers a free soul that dictates his own thoughts in a way that allows him to lead himself in society like some of his characters in *UTC*, *NS* and *BB*.

Bigger in *NS* only regains his freedom of thought and movement after committing his murder against Mary. Whereas he was tense and felt his social environment dictating what to do next, Bigger's crime frees his soul and he becomes a being capable of making his own courageous decisions like staying in the crime scene to further manipulate his persecutors and addressing Jan and Max as his equals while he previously perceived them as a force controlling his moral and spiritual life. In the same vein, to paraphrase P. Tuitt (2000, p.212), Bigger is fully satisfied after his murder because he has succeeded in creating a world of himself, a world over which he has got full control and moves around according to his own desires. The world that Bigger creates for himself, according to Patricia Tuitt, is that in which he has become the rational, objective actor of the law which embodies in itself violence.

Since the law itself oppresses the minor group, one of the ways to reach subjectivity or individualism is to take life away, and indeed, Bigger takes two lives away, namely Mary's and Bessie's. Mary Dalton's death particularly creates for Bigger an «identity within the universal notion of humanity» and he gains «recognition under the law, on terms of the law as it presents itself to Bigger as all-consuming, threatening white blur. Mary's death becomes, for Bigger, a creation, the one supreme, meaningful act of life» (P. Tuitt, 2000, p.212). Also, several characters in *UTC* such as Silas, Sue, and Mann experience spiritual revolution just before dying. Like a soul freed from oppression and ready to enter the world of self-directed beings, one can understand the soul's satisfaction that Wright lets the reader glimpse at Sue's attitude before her death at the hands of her tormentors:

'Yuh didn't git whut yuh wanted: Ah come here by mashef.' [...] She felt rain falling into her wide-open, dimming eyes and heard faint voices. Her lips moved soundlessly. Yuh didn't git yuh didn't yuh didn't [...]. Focused and pointed she was, buried in the depths of her star, swallowed in its peace and strength: and not feeling her flesh growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never dies. (*UTC*, p.213-215)

This description of Sue's end of life demonstrates the spiritual redemption she experiences. Despite the pain, she is satisfied that her tormentors have failed to make her denounce her accomplices thanks to her new status as a self-directed soul which does not submit to anyone. Wright even evokes a whole lexical field of spiritual peace such as "focus," "white star," "freshness," "peace" and "strength" as if to insist on the fact that Sue dies physically, of course, but remains a self-directed soul spiritually free from any constraint as a result of her rebellion against the system of oppression.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it comes out that self-directedness is undeniably of paramount importance in the daily struggles of Wright's protagonists Big Boy, Bigger Thomas and Richard. The study further reveals that because the social environment is oppressive and forbidding, the only means left to black Americans is to adopt de-territorializing and re-territorializing attitudes to move from captivity to freedom of being and acting. Writing is a powerful tool not only to project real-life oppression but also to provide the impetus for the oppressed individuals to escape it. Just as Wright de-territorialized literary norms by refusing to produce art for art's sake as the white literary canon recommended, his black American protagonists de-territorialize from oppressive social norms and literally re-territorialize themselves into their own so as to operate in the domain of self-directedness. Nevertheless, one could put a damper because these illuminating moments of self-directedness can sometimes be risky or short-lived as many self-directed characters in the three novels got lynched. However, regarding the vital importance of freedom and autonomy in the individual's life, was it not worthwhile for black Americans to risk their lives so as to achieve definite self-directedness?

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