Race and Affect in Richard Wright’s *Savage Holiday*

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Submitted January 31, 2012 to *American Quarterly*. 
Introduction

Previously unassailable typologies of the human were falling apart in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. Following on post-Boasian anthropological theory, but also in direct response to Nazi genocides, UNESCO condemned scientific racism in 1951. In the US the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision denied Jim Crow legitimation, even as South Africa moved in the opposite direction, inventing apartheid in 1948. Independence movements spread across the Global South, and the 1955 Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned Nations challenged the integrity and permanence of US and Soviet spheres of influence. The Du Bois scholar Eric Porter has recently referred to this era as the “first post-racial moment”¹—a time, not unlike our own, in which

following this path towards racelessness called into question political and social formations situated in racial experience and potentially abandoned a powerful analytic for understanding the way the world operated. Moreover, it was precisely at the moment when the falsity of race was made public that its persistence and complexity became more apparent. For in the 1940’s, state reforms, the booming war economy, and the scientific and activist challenges to racial inequalities coalesced in ways that paradoxically [both] challenged and perpetuated white supremacy.²

The late forties and early fifties were also, not coincidentally, the years in which Richard Wright rejected his established position as leading African American novelist, and inaugurated an experimental intellectual and artistic trajectory. Moving permanently to Paris in 1947, Wright maintained relationships with many diasporic black intellectuals (including George Padmore, Peter Abrahams, writers associated with Présence Africaine and other African, US and Caribbean expatriates), as well as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and their circle. He also
maintained intellectual allegiance to Marxist theory even as he continued to condemn the Communist Party, and began working down the self-designed philosophical, sociological, literary and psychoanalytic reading list recorded in Michel Fabre’s catalogue of his Paris library.3

Abroad, Wright also made radical topical, generic and thematic choices in his own writing. Major works published from exile include three experimental travelogues (Black Power (1954), The Color Curtain (1956) and Pagan Spain (1957), each addressed to contemporary geopolitics), a volume of essays (White Man, Listen! (1957)), collected stories (Eight Men, 1960) and three novels, The Outsider (1953), Savage Holiday (1954), and The Long Dream (1957). The late novels do have significant continuities with earlier work; like Native Son, all employ crimson, expressionistic violence and an embattled male protagonist’s limited perspective, and all similarly make psychic life central to racial theory. However, these last volumes also systematically reject received models of black identity, black politics and black literature. The Outsider, an existential novel,4 flatly denies African American culture or community any salience for its black antihero’s plight. The Long Dream, perhaps Wright’s most formally perfect work, burlesques the black church and the Civil Rights Movement unmercifully. And Savage Holiday’s well-off white protagonist, apparently apolitical suspense plot, and intense engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis together seem to decouple Wright from black national literature entirely.

Wright’s stubborn philosophical and aesthetic independence moved him far beyond US and African American literary mainstreams after 1947, and despite respectful and curious discussions of the later works by black friends and contemporaries like Arna Bontemps and Lawrence Reddick,5 Irving Howe’s backhanded New Republic elegy for “the talented
autodidact” who “perhaps… read too much, tried too hard, failed to remain sufficiently loyal to
the limits of his talent” quickly became conventional wisdom after Wright’s untimely death in
1960. Paul Gilroy made a widely acknowledged call for new attention to late Wright in 1993, pointing out his post-national stance, studied rejection of received models of African American identity, and intellectual depth, but only a few heeded it. The academic literature on the Paris texts, especially Savage Holiday, remains thin.

This essay reads Savage Holiday in terms of the early-fifties “post-racial moment,” that strange time marked both by official declarations of a “raceless” future, and by the silent rebirth of institutional racism. At the level of narration, in fact, the novel itself acts out the “post-racial’s” double inscription, at once briskly erasing all knowledge of oppression, and compulsive reiterating, rearticulating, and reanimating the fragments of its supposedly dead discourse. Thus, while Wright’s accustomed topos—the psychology of racial oppression in post-Migration African American men—disappears from Savage Holiday, racist words and stereotypes reappear insistently, strongly associated with the most violent, uncanny moments in a supposedly “colorless” text. These frequent (yet granular and discrete) references to blackness, racial difference and popular racial representations are not, thus, simple indications of existing political realities or rhetorical conventions, but an invitation to political reimagining: are we become “raceless”? What “race” may we have in the future? How will we live out our racialized discourses and bodies?

At another level, however, Wright’s odd novel, together with other Parisian writings and interviews on race and psychoanalysis, does not simply pose these questions or the problem of the “post-racial moment” generally, but also formulates an original, theoretically disciplined and flexible answer. What is the future history of “race” and racism? For Wright, twentieth-century
racism is lived as anxiety, and therefore involved in quotidian affect even where direct, material or ideological racial conflict remains absent. It has now a life of its own, in the affective realm that Wright had long considered an important extension or expression of the material, political world.

The present essay begins with a brief overview of Wright’s career-long interest in affect, his longstanding efforts to link racial critique and Freudian theory, and his ambition, after 1947, to use psychoanalysis as a post-Communist political theory. It then examines racial references in Savage Holiday, describing their broadcast distribution, diverse (high-, middle- and lowbrow) intertexts and antecedents, and eventual articulation as a motley master-figure, a “Black Frankenstein”8 that localizes anxiety and permits speculation about the future of racial difference. Finally, it discusses the interesting, if undeveloped possibilities of the novel’s proto-feminist interest in femininity and misogyny for Wright’s black psychoanalytic project. My overall aim is not only to expound the peculiar intellectual resources of Wright’s most under-read work, but also to suggest more broadly the possibilities offered by minor, difficult, hermeneutically unruly texts for thinking in the gap between an outworn political imaginary and some grounds for identification yet to come.

1. Affect, Psychoanalysis, and Wright’s Career Before and After 1947

Wright’s vow, after the sentimentalized reception of Uncle Tom’s Children, “that if I ever wrote another book...it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears”9 is well-known. However, the psychological inquiry that subtends Wright’s avowal has attracted little notice. Yet the essay “How Bigger Was Born,” is about almost nothing but psychology. It opens with its author “confronted and defied by the inexplicable array of his own emotions,”10 examines the psychology of Bigger Thomas’s real-
life models, discusses black underclass enthusiasm for nationalist and fascist movements and leaders\textsuperscript{11} in terms clearly indebted to Freud’s 1921 “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” minutely details Wright’s strategies upon his readers’ feelings,\textsuperscript{12} and designates his own, barely-manageable affective flux as a source for both literature and politics.

Here is how Wright describes his time at the typewriter:

It was an act of concentration, of trying to hold within one’s center all of that bewildering array of facts which science, politics, experience, memory, and imagination were urging upon me. And then, while writing, a new and thrilling relationship would spring up under the drive of emotion, coalescing and telescoping alien facts into a known and felt truth. That was the deep fun of the job: to feel within my body that I was pushing out to new areas of feeling, strange landmarks of emotion, tramping upon foreign soil, compounding new relationships of perceptions, making new and—until that very split second of time!—unheard-of and unfelt effects with words.\textsuperscript{13}

Writing is for Wright not inspiration or intellection, still less mastery of a tradition; it is rather a profoundly corporeal experience, a sort of psychoanalytic-rhetorical discipline that invents, refines and transmits powerful, unprecedented ways of being. Though Wright does not use a technical vocabulary (and indeed, throughout his nonfiction and fiction he eschews even fully banalized psychoanalytic jargon like “ego”), he is describing writing and reading as matters of affect.

Wright’s focus on affect and writing not only ignores the Freudian and Surrealist emphasis, already old hat by 1940, on the traffic between art and the unconscious, but also pushes into relatively under-theorized psychoanalytic territory. “Affect” is, as the glossary authors Laplanche and Pontalis note, one of the many words shared between psychoanalysis and
the broader psychological field. Across disciplines, it distinguishes a diagnostic focus on bodily
evidence from social-conventional descriptors of embodied experience like “feeling,” “mood,”
and “emotion.” Within psychoanalytic thought, it means the total observable evidence of a
person’s vitality, or in Laplanche and Pontalis’s terms, “the qualitative expression of the quantity
of instinctual energy and of its fluctuations.”14 Affect, like physical pain, can’t be repressed, but
as raw signal it lacks a necessary relationship to language and representation. Citing a scene of
writing very like Wright’s before his typewriter, the sociologist Patricia Ticineto Clough defines
affect as a “nonlinear complexity out of which the narration of conscious states such as emotion
are subtracted.”15

In addressing himself to affect, Wright thus defied the broader theoretical and
institutional trend of midcentury Freudianism, focused almost exclusively on bourgeois-Oedipal
normativity and individual analysis. He emphasized, rather, the viscissitudes of the racialized
body, and he also sought anti-racist and anti-poverty, institutional alternatives to the fifty-minute
hour. At first, Wright’s psychoanalytic project was public and activist in nature; the newly
famous author of Native Son rapidly formed collaborative relationships with several US-based
analysts and psychiatrists during the early forties. These included the popular author Fredric
Wertham, whose Lafargue Clinic (a drop-in mental health center in Harlem) both Wright and
Ralph Ellison helped found and publicly supported, the DC psychiatrist and sometime Howard
faculty Benjamin Karpman, and Horace Cayton’s analyst, Helen McLean.16 Wright also gave
public support to an Upstate New York home for “delinquent,” mostly black boys, the Wiltwyck
School, and developed his novella The Jackal (drafted 1945, revised 1959 and published
posthumously as Rite of Passage) based on interviews with the students.17
These under-studied collaborations diminished or vanished around the time of the Wrights’ permanent move abroad, both because an unrepentant leftist and expatriate Wright’s ability to deliver positive press was now starkly limited, and because the broader discursive and bureaucratic imperatives of the “post-racial moment” made certain kinds of reform much more difficult. Yet Wright’s interest in suturing psychoanalysis to anti-racism seems not to have diminished in Paris, but rather to have taken a reflexive turn, in both renewed study of high-theoretical texts, and an intensified inquiry into the connections between affect and modernity broadly construed. Though “How Bigger Was Born” already shows Wright as a confident, creative and critical reader of Freudian texts, after 1947 he acquired dozens of major works by Sigmund and Anna Freud, Sándor Ferenczi, Theodor Reik, Melanie Klein, Octave Mannoni and others. And while his early work used naturalist tropes of moral and psychological degenerescence that append psychology and psychoanalysis to fatalism and determinism, the later Wright consistently discussed a present-and-future of emergent psychic realities that necessarily alter racial politics unpredictably and irrevocably.

For example, discussing the white characters in Savage Holiday, Wright explained in 1956 “...I have become concerned about the historical roots and the emotional problems of Western whites which make them aggressive towards colored people...[In] my travels into the Argentine, into Africa and Asia...I was looking for explanations of the psychological reactions of whites.” Specific, “aggressive” affects are not only integral to racial conflict, in other words, but actually drive white participation in racial oppression. In the 1957 essay “The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People,” Wright depicts white “psychological reactions” in much stronger terms, as the potential to “[burn] up millions of people to make the world safe for the ‘white man’s’ conception of existence, to make the ideas of Mill and Hume and Locke good for
all people, at all times, everywhere.” 22 “Never have so few hated and feared so many,” he writes, 23 and hatred and fear are not epiphenomena, but themselves an arsenal, correlates and motivators of the actual bombs.

Note the sequence of affective-political events that Wright postulates: acceleration, imbalance and sudden transformation. As the 1957 essay explains in detail, “psychological reactions” are not individualized symptoms, but a form of collective action, and as such constituents in a dynamic historical process analogous to the classical Marxist dialectic. 24 Just as capitalism enables socialism, so too white aggression sows the seeds of its own overthrow, teaching the non-white oppressed to use their own “psychological reactions” in revolution. Indeed, for a crypto-Hegelian Wright, white racism—not personal animus, but cultural, economic and political imperialism—was not just the occasion, but the necessary precondition for “colored” peoples to defeat colonialism and pursue liberation. The essay “Psychological Reactions” is therefore primarily concerned, not unlike Frantz Fanon’s 1963 The Wretched of the Earth, with case-studies of resistant colonial subjects—Africans, Indonesians and African Americans—that recount each person’s affect in relation to their experiences with white power.

One of Wright’s most striking subjects is an Indonesian acquaintance, a “hard-bitten young...national revolutionary.” The man recounts his “exploits” against the Dutch, but suddenly interrupts himself when:

[...] a young white newspaperwoman entered on the far side of the room. At once my informant broke off his narrative, leaned forward, and pointed.

“You see that woman?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said.
“Boy, is she in love with the island of Java! She raves about the red clay, the statuesque beauty of our naked peasants [...] She swears that romance and poetry steep every moment of our lives, and that we oughtn’t ever change our way of living in order to be like the West.” He paused and stared. “There must be something lacking in the lives they live in the West that make [sic] them act like that.” Suddenly he straightened in his chair and pulled aside the lapel of his Palm Beach coat and allowed the dun-colored tip of a hand grenade to peep forth. “Boy, if she’d known that I had one of these little babies nestling in each armpit, she would’ve fainted...Ha ha ha...! What do those people think we are?”25

The central event in this story is not the scripted encounter between colonizer and colonized, nor its sexualized and sexist relay to Wright and to us—nor even the grenades, which don’t get used (yet). What happens is the man’s enigmatic, unmanageable affect. His story is unprompted and off-topic. In the course of its six sentences, he leans forward, exclaims “Boy!”, leans back, laughs, leans forward, falls silent, straightens up again, bursts once more into speech, furtively displays his weapons in a mildly sexual gesture, exclaims “Boy” once again, and laughs ambiguously. The woman’s enthusiasm provoked a welter of contradictory feelings, some nameable—anger, disgust, curiosity, sexual attraction, shame, defiance—and some not. There is something else here, some supplemental force inside his body that awaits its proper use. He’s anxious; he’s fidgeting madly.

One possible use for that energy is writing; indeed, little besides writing can take full advantage of such ambivalence and excess. “Psychological Reactions” implicitly acknowledges this fact, since Wright’s conversation with the man takes place in “the pressroom”26 of the 1955 Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned Nations (also the subject of Wright’s The Color Curtain).
As the non-white leaders of half the world’s people met to discuss their common goals and to found alternatives to “alignment” with the US or the USSR, this unknown Javanese man asks, implicitly, his own “alignment” question. He wonders, not only “What do those people think we are?” but also “What part of my anxiety can, or should, be communicated? And how, and to whom?”

These are difficult questions to answer, partly because—strictly speaking—anxiety is itself uninterpretable. Anxiety is not a symptom, not a displaced or condensed representation of some other scene, nor does it constitute a real difference (like sexual organs and secondary characteristics, or racial phenotype) among bodies. It’s enigmatic, without symbolic content, simply present (or absent) in the body. Anxiety can be simulated or dissimulated, emphasized or ignored, but never mistaken; as Roberto Harari glosses Lacan, “the signifier deceives but anxiety does not”. Moreover, anything can prompt anxiety—private thoughts, physical danger, mouthy white women—because what causes anxiety is not the object itself, but the subject’s unresolved question: do I desire that?  

To tell others about your own anxiety, that something buzzing through your body, is thus a mere formality, a question without an answer. They can’t tell whether you desire that, either. Instead, ideally, you will together found a new exchange of ideas. Thus, for example, several theoretical discussions emphasize anxiety’s clinical utility as a spur to analytic exchange, even as the experience itself remains irreducible. So too, the Indonesian revolutionary speaks with Wright, about the white woman journalist, but in a larger project of transnational solidarity. Psychoanalytic theories of anxiety thus point us to a complex ethics of affect, in which intense, enigmatic feeling enables new and unexpected relationships specifically by prompting an effort to read, to assemble the available signs and construe them.
2. Birth of a Savage

Savage Holiday, of course, does not depict anticolonial revolutionaries, but returns to the original question of aggressive white “psychological reactions.” Published as a pulp in 1954 (in exchange for a large advance, after a flat rejection by Wright’s literary publisher, and with the result that absolutely no reviews appeared in the US at all), the novel ignores both the preconditions and the results of anti-black racism, and includes only one minor, unelaborated African American character (the housekeeper, Minnie). Its story concerns an unremarkable, upper-middle-class white man, Erskine Fowler. Through a series of improbable, Oedipally-inflected events, Fowler unintentionally causes the death of a little boy and then murders the child’s mother in a botched cover-up; in the final pages he confesses voluntarily to the police.

This insurance executive antihero is unusual for Wright but typical of the period. Fifties middlebrow fiction and nonfiction, including Philip Wylie’s Generation of Vipers (1941, but reissued with extensive revisions in 1955), David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1950), C. Wright Mills’ White Collar (1951), Sloan Wilson’s novel The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1954), and William Whyte’s Organization Man (1956), often addressed disordered affect in the managerial class.33 Sometimes these works focused on excessive affect, as in Wylie’s incestuously “momist” moms 34 and dangerously self-satisfied “common men”,35 and other times on a disturbing absence of appropriate affects, as in Mills’ cheerful prisoners, Whyte’s limp conformists, Riesman’s anomic crowd or Wilson’s traumatized, detached war veteran. Across all, WASPy whiteness is normative, gender roles are rigid and individual crisis heralds national decadence. Though his reading cannot be dated exactly, Wright owned Mills, Riesman and Whyte,36 and he wrote enthusiastically to Wylie in 1944, praising Vipers’ “blasts...God knows, we need more of that kind of feeling from everybody everywhere.”37
Erskine Fowler, who suffers his breakdown after being forced to retire from a beloved corporate job, is broadly commensurate with this moral panic, but he also differs in two important ways. First, Wright refuses to conserve whiteness as neutral or self-constituting. On the contrary, Fowler is subject to non-white racial markings, whose origins and meanings are left for the reader to fill in. When he undresses for his shower, for example, the tall and heavy man “loomed...his chest covered with a matting of black hair, his genitals all but obscured by a dark forest, his legs rendered spiderlike by their hirsute coating. Tufts of black hair protruded even from under his arms. Nude, Erskine looked anything but pious or Christian.” What does he—looming, black, dark, spiderlike, hirsute, black, named “skin foul”—look like? Like an ape, a gorilla, King Kong. Elsewhere, Fowler is also compared to the Frankenstein monster, and to the hypothetical primitives in Sigmund Freud’s Totem and Taboo, and while none of these nightmare-figures directly or simply refer to black people, all rely on racist fantasy.

Second, and consequentially, Wright engages with the “mass culture” that Riesman, Whyte, Mills and other adjuncts of the Cold War consensus ritually condemned and pointedly ignored. For Wright, across his entire career, not only were popular culture and quotidian racism irretrievably inter-implicated, but elements of the mass-mediated fantasmatic (particularly genre conventions and stock figures) could be repurposed as antiracist critical constructs. His work, especially Native Son, was always deeply involved with filmic and pulp clichés about enjoyment, violence and criminality. Many critics have remarked the importance of Bigger and his friends watching a movie about Hollywood “savages,” for example, and James Smethurst also identifies Bigger with crypto-Negro Thirties film monsters like Kong, Frankenstein, the Mummy, and Mr Hyde. Later in the fifties Wright himself actually played Bigger in an ill-fated film noir.
Now, in *Native Son*, indirect and direct comparisons between Bigger and movie monsters constitute a commentary on Du Boisian “double consciousness,” both underlining the desperate Bigger’s specific “sense of looking at [him]self through the eyes of others” and drawing attention to political contexts for that state of mind, particularly racialized relationships among viewership, performance, and control of the media. In *Savage Holiday*, however, such direct, reformist critique is absent, for while readers still find themselves within, and identified with, the protagonist’s limited perspective, the white Fowler is not scrutinized by hostile others. The confrontation is thus not between black mind and white society, but between affect and discourse, and Wright goes well beyond common-sense accounts of racism, to suggest that Fowler carries “the eyes of others,” a denigrating racist gaze, within himself. Fowler is really large, dark and hairy, and he does regret losing his job; those are simple facts, but when he looks at his naked body, an ape looks back, and he must ask himself the anxious question anew: do I want that?

Characteristically, Wright identifies anxiety’s racial excess as, not merely incoherence or paradox, but a Poe-ish, cosmic crisis, and Fowler’s weird disrobing opens the banal story of an organization man to disaster and sin. His normal Sunday routine is to rise, bathe, eat, and go teach Sunday School, but—annoyed by the racist playtime yells of a neighbor child, “Ahwoo! Ahwoo! The Indians are coming!”—on this first day of “retirement” he does one different thing, stepping briefly into the hall while entirely naked to gather up his scattered Sunday New York Times. He does this despite knowing that the draft he feels along his whole body might blow the door shut. The door does blow shut, locking Fowler out.

A fine film of sweat broke out over the skin of his face. Again he grasped the doorknob and strained at it, hoping that his sheer passion for modesty would somehow twist those
cold bolts of steel; but the door held and he knew that steel was steel and would not bend.
There was no doubt about it; he was locked out, locked out naked in the hallway and at any second one of his neighbors’ doors would open and someone would walk out and find him...They’d scream, maybe, if they were women. Good God, what could he do? His face was wet with sweat now.

He tensed at the faint sound of the elevator doors opening downstairs came to him, echoing hollowly up the elevator shaft. Somebody was coming up! Maybe to this floor! He glared about in the sun-flooded hallway, searching for nooks and crannies in which to hide, clutching awkwardly his bundle of Sunday papers. His hairy body, as he glanced down at it, seemed huge and repulsive, like that of a giant; but, when he looked off, his body felt puny, shriveled, like that of a dwarf. And the hallway in which he stood was white, smooth, modern; it held no Gothic recesses, no Victorian curves, no Byzantine incrustation in, or behind which, he could hide.

_The elevator was coming up..._ \(^{45}\)

Most of us have had a naked-in-public nightmare, but here there is no waking up; the nightmare is real and reality nightmarish. What began as a matter of appearance—Fowler seen as black, inhuman and overly sexual—has become strangely real. His panicked affect is that proper to a trapped ape.

Fowler’s unconscious orchestration of his own exposure, his sense of his “body” swelling and shrinking, his aggression and panic, are all failures of the sexual repression that, according to classical psychoanalytic theory, founds identity, the family, social order, even human culture as such. But while Wright quotes *Totem and Taboo* in an epigraph to Part 1: Anxiety (8), and uses its terms “savage” and “holiday” for his title, \(^{46}\) he does not merely reiterate Freud’s racist
identification of white libido with nonwhite “primitive” people. On the contrary, he encourages skepticism towards psychoanalytic mythology, though not in the feminist or cultural-relativist terms with which scholars are most familiar today. His approach, rather, is to group the anthropological Freud with other unreliable cosmogonies. For example, one of the epigraphs for the entire novel is this verse from the book of Job: “And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house...” 47 Neither a climactic moment in the Biblical story, nor a well-known example of the KJV’s poetry, the quotation instead forecasts the draft that slams Fowler’s apartment door shut, and invites readers to make broader comparisons between Fowler and Job.

The Bible is the working-class autodidact’s volume par excellence—the only book allowed by Wright’s Seventh-Day Adventist grandmother, and the only one the white, Baptist Fowler, whose class origins were similar, 48 ever reads. To such readers, Fowler’s naked and vulnerable condition literalizes Job’s initial statement in the face of his devastation: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21). This latter verse does not appear in the novel, but any reasonably literate Christian would know it—and to thus “hear” the resonant Biblical phrase under Fowler’s tacky exhibitionism is to invert and parody Freud’s habit of making ancient texts serve modern psychological exegeses.

This comparison is not scholarly, of course, but that’s the point: a reader who can link Fowler’s affliction to Job’s is not only prepared to challenge Freudian specifics, but also to disregard bourgeois cultural authority as such. Such anti-authoritarian reading practices had strong personal and political significance for Wright, whose self-education began when he used a borrowed library card and forged permission note (“Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger
boy...”49) to borrow some works by the polemicist H.L. Mencken from a Memphis library. Irrespective of the specific ideas on offer, Mencken’s frank aggression opened writerly, intellectual and affective possibilities for the young man Richard. “He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me...Occasionally I glanced up to reassure myself that I was alone in the room.”50

This is the “psychological reaction” theorized in Wright’s 1957 essay: white aggression, by its mere existence, provokes a range of intense black affects, and suggests revolutionary tactics. So, too, the most important fact about Erskine Fowler’s lockout is not its consequence for the plot, but the anxiety it transmits to readers, and the task of re-reading that we accept in its wake.

3. Over-determination

Once sold to the pulp house Avon, Savage Holiday’s material and institutional existence articulated a much more conservative account of the relationships among reading, race and affect than did the text itself. In the mid-fifties, paperback fiction was sold in drugstores, train stations and other low-status venues, often dealt with stigmatized forms of sexuality, and enjoyed little more cultural status than the B-movies, true-confession comics and pornography whose conventions it pirated. Pulp was supposed to divert and titillate, and judging from the cover they created, Avon worked diligently to show that Savage Holiday would get the job done.

The original cover image, a Clark Hulings painting, depicts an angry (but blonde, hairless, handsome and bathrobe-clad) Fowler standing behind a much smaller Mabel Blake (who wears a yellow housecoat, and bears a startling resemblance to the young Elizabeth Taylor). He grasps her upper arms, as if to detain her. She does not resist, but clasps her hands
and makes a sad face. Cool morning light slants past a bark-cloth curtain; the scene is post-coital, though in the text the two never have sex. The editorial copy also consists of prurient hints: “the gripping story of an act of violence in a New York apartment house—and the effect it has on a lonely bachelor and a bereaved mother.” Above the figures, the cover announces “By the author of NATIVE SON,” and Wright’s unsmiling photograph adorns the back.

These words and images let buyers know that they can expect two familiar things for their thirty-five cents—a misogynist heterosexual act, and a general noirish cynicism guaranteed by fleeting apparitions of angry black men. Distressingly, the same two hermeneutic hobby-horses inform much of the academic literature today; most critics have repeatedly focused on Erskine Fowler’s bloody, sexualized murder of his next-door neighbor Mabel Blake to the exclusion of the larger text, and sometimes even in preference to the prior, violent death Mabel’s murder was meant to conceal. Some designate Savage Holiday as a typical instance of 1950’s gynophobia and mother-hating, while others expound it as an original discussion of the same, but with one exception (Dubek) all discuss Wright’s unhappy relationship with his mother Ella Wright, and assign matricidal fantasies to the author himself on the basis of his work.

Such criticism, however, in which textual excess and contradiction are reduced to psychopathology, does not so much read Savage Holiday, as merely cite the rules of its genre. According to Judith Halberstam’s Skin Shows, late-nineteenth and twentieth-century “Gothic” texts about unnatural, marked, dismembered or deformed bodies “[transform] class struggle, hostility towards women, and tensions arising out of...racism into what looks like sexual or psychosexual battles between and within individuals. The monster is consistently read as his maker’s alter ego, as his unconscious, as the return of the repressed.” For Halberstam, such works are themselves originally complicit in this Procrustean truth-regime, and only a
professional academic criticism capable of naming and organizing all the social and political constituents of their “sexual or psychosexual battles” can release the monster’s subversive potential.

Wright, too, sought to explicate “class struggle, hostility towards women, and tensions arising out of...racism,” but instead of trying to analyze their sociohistorical and ideological constituents, he sought to elaborate their affective reality. In other words, he did not write about what causes social injustice, nor how it is institutionalized and perpetuated, nor even—after rejecting both socialist realism and African American race-leadership—how best to oppose it. Instead, Wright wanted to know how oppression and anxiety are lived, and particularly how they are lived at a distance from obvious political conflicts. Thus, _Savage Holiday_ does not offer an alternative to the over-determined pulp story of a bad woman who had it coming, but instead widens the frame to include people, experiences and ideas that initially seem extraneous to the problems of racialized “savagery” and quotidian misogyny. Before Mabel Blake’s death was that of her son Tony, a neglected and lonely child who Fowler had cautiously befriended. Something different, something extra, happened there.

When we left Fowler, he was standing in the hallway, panicked. Suddenly remembering that he can reenter his apartment via the bathroom window, he steps out onto a common balcony, only to meet his six-year-old neighbor, “clad in a cowboy’s outfit, standing atop his electric hobbyhorse near the edge of the balcony.” It was Tony who had been yelling about, and in the stereotyped voice of, “Indians.” With perfect identification, the child demonstrates all the terror Fowler feels, and all the disgust the adult believes his naked body deserves. Shying away from Fowler’s bumbling attempts at reassurance, and screaming “Naaaaaw...!” in an echo of Wright’s own early-childhood screams, Tony falls over the railing, ten stories down to his
death. Fowler freezes, “straining his ears, waiting to hear some sound—a sound that he thought would surely stop the beating of his heart. Then he heard it; there came a distant, definite, soft, crushing yet pulpy: *PLOP!*”

Tony’s death is deeply unnerving, and not just because of its arbitrariness and graphic violence. The scene also combines ideas and feelings that ought, in a stable moral and psychological universe, to remain separate, and hence it involves readers themselves in the novel’s anxieties. For example, that onomatopoeic “*PLOP!*” mixes sober description with pleasurable noisemaking, and visceral disgust with involuntary laughter, such that readers’ own affects defy common standards of respect, propriety and psychological normality. Further, the scene also mixes theory with mimesis, psychoanalytic dramaturgy with literary naturalism: confronted with virile authority (his naked, hairy, huge neighbor), the six-year-old boy really does die. Theoretical fictions become indistinguishable from fictional exegesis, in a chiasmus—the story is really an interpretation, the interpretation really a story; the accident is really castration, castration is really an accident; the dead child is really Fowler’s neurosis, Fowler’s neurosis is really a dead child—that seems to refigure reading itself as endlessly recirculating anxiety.

In other words, when Wright moved the “Gothic” story beyond the easy conservatism of killing off a bad woman, he did not do so by offering some other, approved method for interpreting women or morality or racism or violence. Instead, he placed readers themselves amid Fowler’s problem of racialized anxiety. We suddenly see something mixed, confused, obscene—something disjunct from practical racial politics, but always marked, like Tony’s “cowboys and indians” game, or Fowler’s hairy body, with racist metaphors of taint and savagery. And we are forced to ask ourselves, “Do I really want—that?” (For example, do I want...
to laugh at a child’s death?) As we have seen, though, anxiety’s utility is in the renewed effort to read that it sparks.

4. Black Frankenstein

Racial impurity, sexual shame, misogyny, the violence of adults towards children—each is alone sufficient basis for a monster story, at least in Halberstam’s sense of a mass-mediated “Gothic” that forecloses social conflict and quarantines the psychic from history. Erskine Fowler, though, does not embody any one such moral panic; rather, Wright assembled him out of fragments of them all. Even Savage Holiday’s composition seems to have been a matter of suture and synthesis. The first holograph, conceived during a high fever and written in urgent, scrawling pencil, begins with a character sketch of Fowler himself and goes on to narrate the core events, much as they appear in the final version. Later drafts mostly append additional scenes and intertextual references, sometimes at prepublication readers’ request but often without obvious formal or aesthetic motivations, and never significantly altering the bizarre plot. Fascinatingly, the first literary quotation to appear, lines spoken by Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus (“See, see, where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!/ One drop would save my soul”) was added to the last page of the completed pencil draft in blue ink and a French hand, possibly that of Wright’s friend and translator Hélène Bokanowski.

Savage Holiday, in other words, is a Frankenstinian body, assembled out of scraps and galvanized by its creator’s hubris. And Wright clearly found the analogy between writer and mad scientist productive, for Savage Holiday is replete with allusions to Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Or, The Modern Prometheus. The “hulking, heavy, muscular,” and racially suspect Erskine Fowler broadly resembles the huge, ugly, “yellow skin[ned]” and nonhuman creature. Then, too, Fowler accidentally kills an innocent child, and deliberately murders a sexualized woman,
crimes he shares with Shelley’s creature (via filmic simplifications). Fowler also dreams Victor Frankenstein’s elaborate, incestuous dream about embracing a woman’s rotting corpse, and later, like the scientist destroying the female “mate” on the lab bench, he stabs Mabel Blake to death on the kitchen table. Shelley’s creature is even, like Wright and Fowler both, a furtive autodidact given to perverse interpretations of religious texts.

Moreover, reading Shelley in Wright gives a deep genealogy to what might otherwise seem his mere idiosyncrasy in using mass-mediated tropes as critical devices. Wright’s assumption that conventional racial politics are invalid, and his anxious, grotesquely corporeal antihero both reflect a racialized US tradition of appropriating Shelley, recently described by Elizabeth Young in *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*. The creature appears in a thousand high-, middle- and lowbrow incarnations, from the 1830’s to the present, as a dangerous but vital “monster” that allows audiences to speculate about the future of race. “Black Frankenstein” texts can take significant distance from their source, sometimes retaining only the trope of an artificial person characterized by extreme affects, but they always feature a racist narrative logic. The popular film *Avatar*, predicated on new, blue, cyborg bodies, yet obeisant to white male supremacy and the high-modernist myth of the primitive, is a particularly clear recent example.

In other words, Shelley’s work is not only itself segmented and repurposed by neo-Gothic *bricoleurs*. It is also a longstanding device for talking about discursive fragments and cultural construction, especially the peculiar, palimpsestic process of constructing racial differences. As Young explains, “[t]he creation of the monster enacts the process by which dead metaphors are brought back to life.”* Savage Holiday* specifically posits the white Erskine Fowler as one such monster; in him, old figures of black threat like King Kong, the Frankenstein monster, the
prehistoric “savage” and Bigger Thomas are brought back to life, beyond their original conditions of existence, and demand new critical practices.

5. Women and Conservatism

However, Wright’s participation in the Black Frankenstein complex also points us towards Savage Holiday’s last-minute, and specifically gendered, swerve into “post-racial” conservatism. The character Mabel Blake is without precedent or parallel in Wright’s work, an intelligent and articulate, white working-class woman and mother very unlike the foolish, shrewish stereotypes that dominate Native Son, Black Boy, and Uncle Tom’s Children. Yet, the novel deals with this feminine innovation much as Victor Frankenstein dealt with the female creature: by destroying her before she can accomplish anything. Victor began to build a “mate” at the male creature’s request but, terrified at the prospect of the new “race” multiplying, “tore to pieces the thing” lying across the lab table, and scattered body parts around the room in an excess of misogynist and racist violence. So too, Savage Holiday wraps up as Halberstam might have predicted: after Mabel both refuses to marry him, and threatens to reveal his involvement in Tony’s death, Fowler stabs her to death on the kitchen table.

Importantly, even though he limited his novel to a violent man’s perspective, Wright clearly indicates that other perspectives are possible. In fact, Mabel Blake—her name echoing as “maybe?”—quite literally speaks for herself, in sharp proto-feminist monologues that reflect Wright’s knowledge of Simone de Beauvoir. She repeatedly reads femininity as a snare and an illusion, much like The Second Sex, and emphasizes the realities of economic, sexual and maternal oppression. Moreover, she does so with a striking attention to affect and its critical potential. Simply by stating the difference between what she is supposed to feel, and what she really does feel, for example, Mabel demolishes idealized mother-love: “I know that you know I
didn’t love Tony. I didn’t want ‘im…it’s not in my nature to be a mother... Suddenly a baby is dropped in my lap, and I’ve got to work...”

Mabel also laughs sardonically, and cries, when she observes to Fowler “You reminded me so much of Tony [...] You need a mother,” because she knows that “mother” is just an instrument, a tool, and the “Oedipus complex” a profoundly retrograde mystification of women’s nurturant and sexual labor.

Furthermore, like Bessie Mears guessing that a nervous Bigger Thomas has killed Mary Dalton (see Johnson), Mabel can also read Fowler’s affect very accurately. Near the end of the story, she gently asks “Erskine, do you want to confess something to me?” In fact, she was suspicious about Tony’s death all along, watching Fowler, cultivating their relationship, and even making harassing, hang-up calls to his apartment in an effort to “bluff you into telling.” Surprisingly, if this novel were a case study, Mabel would be the psychoanalyst; if it were pulp or film noir, she would be the detective. As elsewhere in Wright’s work, sustained attention to affect and its vicissitudes can potentially enable new relationships between people and new political futures.

Mabel, though, has no future, and no prospect of any real conversation or exchange; when Fowler strangles and stabs her, “Her lips moved wordlessly, as though trying to form pleas for which there was not air in her lungs to give sound...” More subtly, her death also forecloses what Wright had developed so painstakingly elsewhere: the association between anxiety and racism. Instead, this gory Lustmord reduces all anxiety to misogyny, rewrites social conflict as personal guilt, and refuses to acknowledge that discourse escapes individual intentions.

This sudden foreclosure of inquiry into racial difference is all the more striking given Savage Holiday’s basis in a disturbing and singular consequence of Wright’s first brush with fame, a 1941 femicide committed by a black male fan who had recently been paroled on
Wright’s recommendation. Clinton Brewer sent Wright a fan letter about Native Son in 1941.

He had been given a long sentence at the age of seventeen for murdering his much older, white wife, Helen Schenk Brewer, but while serving his sentence he studied music independently, and began composing jazz. Wright visited Brewer in prison, and brought the latter’s work “Stampede in G Minor” to Count Basie, who recorded it to moderate success. With the support of Wright, Basie, and the music producer John Hammond, Brewer unexpectedly won parole after nearly two decades of imprisonment. Soon after his release, though, Brewer murdered another woman, Wilhelmina Washington, a black Sugar Hill (Harlem) resident and mother of two teenaged boys, stabbing her to death when she refused to marry him and stashing her body in a closet.

Wright continued to assist Brewer even after the latter pled guilty, obtaining legal help and a psychiatric evaluation from a well-known psychiatrist, Fredric Wertham, that saved the convicted man from the chair, and he also kept Brewer in mind long after leaving the United States. In 1954, while Brewer remained in prison, Wright headed Savage Holiday “Dedication to CLINTON BREWER.”

Strikingly, the novel’s dénouement both repeats certain specifics of Brewer’s second murder—the refused proposal, the knife, the victim’s motherhood and the murderer’s prior guilt—and seems to imply that race, or at least the victim’s race, had nothing to do with the original crime. True, the murder scene figures racialized “savagery” once more; as with Bigger Thomas and the movie monsters, his attack on an attractive white woman slots him into the myth of the frenzied black rapist. Yet Mabel herself has no implication in racist discourse, no traffic with clichés or stereotypes, no personal racist bogeys. She does not imagine herself as an imperiled white heroine, showing no fear towards the lowering, bellowing Fowler until he actually has his hands on her throat. In other words, while the criminal Erskine Fowler remains
both subject to the Du Boisian problem of “looking at [him]self through the eyes of others,” and “dedicated” to the lifelong inmate Clinton Brewer, the victim Mabel Blake simply makes both the black Wilhelmina Washington and the white Helen Schenk Brewer vanish. Men and murderers have both racial identities and thoughts about race, but dead women are just dead women.

Wright’s plot resolution thus reflects the psychoanalytic work of Fredric Wertham, who became a personal friend after participating in Brewer’s defense.84 A psychiatrist and prolific cultural critic who studied convicted criminals, Wertham described seemingly irrational murders, including femicides, in terms of a “catathymic crisis,” 85 an overwhelming yet transitory experience of compulsion, anxiety, and violent release ultimately caused, not by any specific personal circumstance, but by the accelerating trauma and anomie of modern life.86 However, though “catathymic crisis” might adequately describe Bigger Thomas or Clinton Brewer, in principle it had no special involvement with racial stereotypes, racism, or racial conflict. Indeed, it was not, by Wertham’s account, a form of anxiety at all, but an episodic neurosis, best understood in terms of poor and working-class men’s inability to achieve Oedipal masculinity. With a faith in progress that Wright never shared, Wertham believed that murder was a public-health problem, and that it could be eliminated from human society, like smallpox.87

Wright seems, in ending his novel with Fowler’s terse confession to the police,88 to endorse Wertham’s mental hygienics over and against his own established interest in the racial history of affects. Beyond that he also seems to move away from an emphasis on paradox, and towards the neoconservative sense of a “post-racial moment,” as a time in which it is no longer appropriate or necessary to use racial categories. He also builds that stolid refusal to think more about fugitive and slippery terms on a refusal to pursue feminist insight beyond a certain point.
All Wright’s virtuosic reading, all his complex, unexpected ways of combining disparate ideas, literary references, and scenes seems to collapse here, into the deadening idea that racial difference really doesn’t matter after all.

It’s essential to remember, however, that Wright died at a shockingly young age in 1960, before the realization of new social movements (including Black Power/ Black Arts, second-wave feminism, and gay liberation) that insisted “the personal is political,” and that could have integrated his lifelong interest in race and “psychological reactions” with their transformative projects. After Wright pointed out that racist discourse exceeded the real-world contingencies of racial difference, he had nowhere to go, no sense of what came next. Thus, Savage Holiday is most interesting for its synthetic, Frankenstinian process, which dared to combine and animate all kinds of fragments, and not as a final or fully-realized statement about race, affect and futurity.

2 Ibid., 11.

3 Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books & Writers*. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1990. This useful volume comprises an alphabetical list of the books Wright owned at his death, along with a comprehensive anthology of public and private statements about other writers. According to Fabre, most of the books were acquired after the move to Paris.

4 On Wright’s complex engagement with the existentialist archive in this work, see Jeffrey Attebury, “Entering the Politics of the Outside: Richard Wright’s Critique of Marxism and Existentialism.” *mfs: Modern Fiction Studies* 51.4 (Winter 2005), 873-895.


10 Ibid., 434.

11 Ibid., 440-6.

12 Ibid., 456, 457-60.

13 Ibid., 457.


16 The Wright Papers, housed in the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale’s Beinecke Library, include correspondence and an unpublished manuscript from Karpman, dated 1942-45 (JWJ Box 100 Folder 1416; JWJ Box 89 Folder 1105), many letters and offprints from Wertham dated across the forties, (JWJ Box 112 Folder 1791; JWJ Box 139 Folder 2028), and an offprint of McLean’s 1945 case-study “Frightened People” (JWJ Box 139 Folder 2024).


18 Wertham famously published “An Unconscious Determinant in Native Son” (Journal of Clinical Psychopathology and Psychotherapy 6 (July 1944): 111-115) after some undetermined number of analytic sessions with Wright. Plans to publish a theoretical text jointly with Karpman seem to have come to naught by 1945. Gabriel N. Mendes, “A Deeper Science: Richard Wright, Dr. Fredric Wertham, and the Fight for Mental Health Care in Harlem, NY, 1940-1960” (Diss. Brown University, 2010), partially attributes Wright’s inspiration to write Black Boy to his interactions with Cayton and McLean at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis in 1943 (Mendes, A Deeper Science, 40-41). On Wright’s biggest activist achievement on race and mental health, the Lafargue Clinic, see Doyle, “‘A Fine New Child,’” and Mendes, A Deeper Science.

19 For example, the Lafargue Clinic (despite its low operating costs and community popularity) closed in 1958 because of the “post-racial moment’s” characteristic one-two punch: decreasing public discussion of racial oppression, coupled with new institutional practices that reinvent inequality. Black “juvenile delinquency” was no longer a matter of interest to the media or to charitable donors, yet new, elaborated rules about tax exemptions and eligibility prevented the Clinic from using public funds. See Doyle, “‘A Fine New Child,’” 212.
20 See individual entries in Fabre, Richard Wright: Books & Writers.


23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 690 et passim.

25 Ibid., 664.

26 Ibid.

27 In early psychoanalytic inquiry, anxiety was considered a symptom of sexual abstinence. Freud dropped this position in 1926; see Makari, Revolution in Mind: The
Creation of Psychoanalysis (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 156-61, 364, 390, for a readable account and further references.


32 See Shephardson, “Foreword,” in Harari, Lacan’s Seminar on “Anxiety”, xxvii-xxix; the present discussion abstracts only a few key concepts from his discussion of Freud, Lacan and Harari. At this writing, Lacan’s Seminar X: L’Angoisse has not been published in English translation.

33 See also Laura Dubek, “Till Death Do Us Part: White Male Rage in Richard Wright’s Savage Holiday” (The Mississippi Quarterly 61.4 (Fall 2008): 593-613), on gender constructions in the early fifties.


36 See entries in Fabre, Richard Wright: Books & Writers.

37 Ibid., 191.


39 Wright, Savage Holiday, 40.
40 See Bart Beaty, Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 80-81.


43 See also Tuhkanen, The American Optic, on gaze in Native Son.

44 Wright, Savage Holiday, 38.


46 “…in the very nature of a holiday there is excess; the holiday mood is brought about by the release of what is forbidden” (Wright, Savage Holiday, 9). The key terms are Wilder and Fest in Freud’s German; Wright used the Brill translation. Strachey translates Fest as “festival” (Freud, Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental

47 Job 1:19 [KJV]; quoted in Wright, Savage Holiday, 7.

48 See Wright, Savage Holiday 38-40.


50 Ibid., 249.

51 Wright, Savage Holiday, 214-16.


55 Wright, Savage Holiday, 53.

56 On the Fowler-Tony identification, see JanMohamed, The Death-Bound Subject, 220-23.

57 Wright, Savage Holiday, 54.

58 See Wright, Black Boy 6, 14, 43-44, 51-52.
59 Wright, *Savage Holiday*, 54.


62 Wright Papers Box 59, Folder 698; *Savage Holiday* 167. I made this tentative identification through comparisons with her letters (Wright Papers Box 94, Folder 1217). I welcome any further information about the manuscripts, Wright’s compositional methods, or his artistic and intellectual interlocutors in Paris.


64 Shelley, *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus*. Ed. Johanna M. Smith (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), 60; see also James Whale’s iconic Karloff.


67 Wright, *Savage Holiday*, 215-16; this incident is also discussed below.

69 Young, *Black Frankenstein*, 79.

70 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 145.

71 Ibid., 148.


74 Wright, *Savage Holiday*, 192-3.

75 Ibid., 183.

76 Ibid., 191.
77 Ibid., 193.

78 Ibid., 215.

79 See Rowley, Richard Wright, 257-8 and Mendes, A Deeper Science, 14-16.


82 Wright, Savage Holiday, 5.

83 Ibid., 214.

84 The two men later collaborated on a number of projects that used psychoanalysis for antiracist social reform; see note 16 above.

85 “[F]rom the Greek kata meaning “according to” and thymos meaning “wish” (Beaty, Fredric Wertham, 22).

Beaty, *Fredric Wertham*, 33.

Wright, *Savage Holiday*, 220-222.