

Everybody's Statistical Record: Richard Wright and the Determinations of Late Naturalism

"Statistics leaves a man only after his death—after it has ascertained the precise age of his death and noted the causes that brought about his end."

—Ernst Engel¹

"I am a very average Negro, and that may be why I'm exceptional."

—Richard Wright²

CRITICAL DEBATES AROUND RICHARD WRIGHT'S most famous and notorious novel, *Native Son* (1940), have largely focused on conflicting conceptions of Bigger Thomas. Is Bigger an average and representative figure, a gross and fictive stereotype, or an exceptional deviant? Is he a realist individual, asserting himself in the world, or the naturalist byproduct of forces beyond his control and comprehension? Wright stages these very questions, presaging the novel's vexed critical history, in the novel's infamous and interminable courtroom trial. Throughout the trial, interpretations of facts are more in dispute than the facts themselves, and Bigger's defense lawyer, Boris Max, makes a case for the hardest determinism. In so doing, he even engages in a sort of makeshift statistics, extrapolating Bigger as prototypical of a larger population in a manner that mirrors the statistical governance of the New Deal state:

Multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times, allowing for environmental and temperamental variations, and for those Negroes who are completely under the influence of the church, and you have the psychology of the Negro people. But once you see them as a whole, once your eyes leave the individual and encompass the mass, a new quality comes into the picture. Taken collectively, they are not simply twelve

ABSTRACT This essay approaches Richard Wright's naturalist novel *Native Son* (1940) as a statistically informed project that explores probability and potentiality not as theoretical concepts but as material and historical phenomena instantiated by the emerging statistical governance of the New Deal state. I demonstrate the ways Bigger is rendered as information throughout the novel to show that Wright's work anticipates how the state was increasingly relying on nonvisual, informatic processes of perception, foreshadowing the racialized data of the digital age. *REPRESENTATIONS* 164. © 2023 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 115–36. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2023.164.5.115>.

million people; in reality they constitute a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive *within* this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights.³

Max's attempt to generate a statistically meaningful extrapolation of the entire Black population fails, diegetically at least, to convince the court. The lawyer for the prosecution, Buckley, more successfully paints Bigger as a radically exceptional figure—a “miserable human fiend”—whose death is necessary to maintain systemic stability (407). Labeling Bigger as either a purely exceptional individual or a totally determined representative of a racialized collectivity, however, cannot account for the way he captures the contradictory subjectivity of being both these things at once. Bigger ends up with the worst of all worlds: branded as a completely determined figure without individuality, he is nonetheless sentenced and executed as just such an individual.

The sides to this diegetic argument—whether to interpret Bigger as a determined prototype or an exceptional deviant—amount to opposing interpretations of the first two sections of the novel itself, and the lawyers' conflicting views largely map onto contemporaneous critical debates regarding the degree to which *Native Son* was representative of social reality. Wright, for his part, fervently maintained his novel's verisimilitude and had recourse to an emergent, statistics-driven sociology to do so. As Carla Cappetti argues, Wright's naturalism was a literary counterpart to the Chicago school of sociology, with Wright seeking “a more objective literature which rediscovered the individual's unbreachable ties with his or her culture and environment” and the Chicago school seeking “a more subjective sociology” beyond the limits of statistics.⁴ In this joint articulation, novelists and sociologists reached outside their respective disciplines in an attempt to transcend perceived limits. Ultimately, however, they did so in order to validate their original disciplines. Wright enacts such an intellectual move in his introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Clayton's 1945 *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, a sociological study and history of Chicago's African American population. Wright expresses a profound ecstasy at the capacity of statistics to materialize forces that otherwise could only be felt by their effects: “The huge mountains of fact piled up by the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago gave me my first concrete vision of the forces that molded the urban Negro's body and soul.”⁵ Wright imagines *Black Metropolis* as a sort of companion text to his own work that assures its validity:

If, in reading my novel, *Native Son*, you doubted the reality of Bigger Thomas, then examine the delinquency rates cited in this book; if, in reading my autobiography, *Black Boy*, you doubted the picture of family life shown there, then study the figures

on family disorganization given here. . . . After studying the social processes in this book, you cannot expect Negro life to be other than what it is. To expect the contrary would be like expecting to see Rolls-Royces coming off the assembly lines at Ford's River Rouge plant! The imposed conditions under which Negroes live detail the structure of their lives like an engineer outlining the blue-prints for the production of machines.⁶

Wright depicts statistics as undeniable, exposing a process of social development that is essentially automated. As Jean-Christophe Cloutier writes, he “gives one the impression that his method was simply to sift through the newest compiled data available and immediately make his fiction match the fact.”⁷ We are led to believe that *Native Son* is nothing more than a narrativization of this data. This accords with Wright's essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” in which he explicitly describes Bigger in terms of aggregation: “there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect.”⁸ Indeed, Wright's account far exceeds anything that he could personally have witnessed: “I made the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him, everywhere.”⁹ These millions could not have been collected via direct encounters but were, rather, generated by abstracting Bigger Thomas as a “distinct type” based on a smaller but presumably exemplary sample of individuals: this is statistics, not ethnography.¹⁰ In seeking such “proof” of his fiction, however, Wright seems to fully subordinate his work to statistics; *Native Son* becomes merely the literary expression of this harder, more scientific truth.

Yet by tying his work so closely to statistics' evidentiary capacity, Wright provides the very terms in which that work would be rejected by other prominent African American authors, most notably James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, who defined the goals of literary writing as inherently opposed to sociology's desire to render race empirically visible and calculable. For Baldwin, in the essays “Everybody's Protest Novel” and “Many Thousands Gone,” the statistical basis of Wright's novel renders it incapable of “revealing” the complexity and specificity of the individual instance. Baldwin posits an understanding of humanity as “something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable,” and thus intrinsically resistant to Wright's attempts at scientific resolution.¹¹ Whereas Wright likens the South Side of Chicago to a Ford assembly line, Baldwin emphasizes the excessive and uncontrollable complexity of human experience. Ellison, in “The World and the Jug,” similarly advocates for the importance of variation and exceptionality, which he claims Wright's “narrow naturalism” cannot permit.¹² Writing against Irving Howe's positive assessment of *Native Son*, Ellison asks, “why is it that so many of those who would tell us the meaning of Negro life never bother to learn how varied it really is?” As proof of this variation, Ellison turns not to

Bigger Thomas but to Richard Wright himself: “Wright could imagine Bigger, but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright.”¹³ Bigger’s inability to transcend his circumstances and environment means that Wright “was proposing a one-sided form of social determinism that his own life contradicted.”¹⁴ For Ellison, Wright’s existence proves that exceptions to this one-sided determinism exist, invalidating Wright’s literary project—if that project is taken to be one of proving an inevitability—through the demonstration of “human possibility” that is Richard Wright the author. While such a possibility may be improbable, Ellison, like Baldwin, suggests that it is literature’s purpose to offer such possibilities—if not through utopian interventions, then at least through the depiction of an individual’s capacity to defy, resist, and transcend total determination.

Both Wright’s self-assessment and Baldwin and Ellison’s rejections do, however, share an understanding of individual and statistical outcomes as in opposition, albeit with different suggestions as to which perspective the literary writer should pursue. Individuality, for both sides, is associated with improbability, good outcomes, and the literary, while aggregation is associated with predictability, bad outcomes, and the statistical. The two sides of the debate thus seem irreconcilable, with one’s assessment of *Native Son* tending to reflect one’s feelings on the truth-value of statistics. If statistics are “right”—that is, they correspond to one’s understanding of extant material conditions—the novel is accurately deterministic; if statistics are “wrong”—reductive quantifications unable to capture the overwhelming and irreducible possibility of the real—the novel is negatively deterministic. Yet all seem to agree that it *is* deterministic, in the sense of Bernard Bell’s declaration that *Native Son* and naturalist novels like it “are informed by the belief that the character and history of man can be completely explained by biological and socioeconomic facts.”¹⁵

By paying attention to the shared statistical discourse of these differing interpretations, we can escape the stale critical impasse of evaluating Bigger Thomas as a “good” or “bad” creation and instead consider how, as a fictional character based on sociological data, he mediates the aesthetic desire in the New Deal era to visualize and render perceivable this emerging data. Wright and the New Deal state he criticizes share this desire, and when read in this fashion *Native Son* provides key insights into how the state was “seeing” in increasingly statistical ways that complicate the simple binary of visibility and invisibility set up in Wright and Ellison’s critical readings.

To be rendered into information by the state is to be not passively recorded but actively, and often violently, contorted into legibility. My understanding of the New Deal state’s statistical vision draws on the work of James C. Scott, who in *Seeing Like a State* discusses “legibility as a central problem in statecraft.” The state can never perceive unmediated its domain

or the people within it, Scott argues, but must always do so through “state simplifications.”¹⁶ It must proactively remake the world into a legible form such that it can perceive that world. As Scott recognizes, the state is not completely ignorant; it knows that its simplifications do not “successfully represent the actual activity of the society they depicted,” but these representations nonetheless have real (and often violent) effects.¹⁷ The state constantly strives to overcome the epistemic anxiety produced by the incompleteness of the simplifications through which it perceives reality, even if that overcoming is theoretically impossible. This anxiety, however, is neither evenly distributed nor equally emergent across populations, and the widespread sociological data and statistical forecasting in the New Deal era built upon a much older project dating to the slave passes and lantern laws of the eighteenth century, which rendered Black people into legible and trackable forms. In this way, the act of perceiving race generates that which it perceives.¹⁸ Similarly, Bigger Thomas does not exist for us as readers or critics in a direct or unmediated way, nor does a reality behind the statistics that Wright embodies in him. Thus, I examine *Native Son* less in terms of how Bigger Thomas exemplifies—or doesn’t—a particular population, as defined by the state’s own identity categories, and more as a figure who is actively produced by the very systems and technologies designed to identify, surveil, and ensnare him.

I approach Wright’s naturalist novel in what follows as a statistically informed project that explores probability and potentiality not as theoretical concepts but as material and historical phenomena. Reading from this vantage requires us to reformulate the question of who Bigger “is” and instead ask: who was he likely to be, and how likely were others to be him? Positioning *Native Son* in this way reveals the extent to which Bigger’s presence in the text is essentially informatic: that is, Bigger is not merely apprehended or perceived by the state but is generated as information such that he is legible to it. I demonstrate the ways Bigger is rendered as information throughout the novel: as a government case record, a rapidly circulating photograph, and a probabilistic point on the abstract map tracking his failed escape. Bigger is not reducible to these informatic forms, but neither is he separable from them. Attention to Wright’s formal efforts to represent the perceptions of the state reveals his anticipation of the ways it was increasingly relying on nonvisual, informatic processes, foreshadowing the racialized data of the digital age.¹⁹

Native Son appeared at a moment when statistics were of intensified importance to the US state and the very relationship of statistics to governance was changing. *Native Son* does not merely reflect this historical moment but is co-constitutive of a larger discourse that asked what it meant to be numbered and what exactly those numbers were and would be. Wright’s interest in statistics

and sociology has been well documented. Indeed, the influence of statistical data is largely seen as one of the defining characteristics of the African American literary output of the 1930s and 40s, most strongly associated with Wright and Ann Petry and typically categorized as (late) naturalism or social realism. Cloutier notes how these writers' work emerged "out of a careful study of emerging socioeconomic statistical data," while Lawrence P. Jackson typifies their naturalism as an attempt to "explain the statistics that regularly confused people and seemed to support the hoary notions of biological inferiority."²⁰ These scholars make clear that such data was nascent and of unclear import. Wright's work argues strongly in favor of its value but does so in a more complicated fashion than most accounts have recognized. Bigger Thomas, as a fictional figure drawn from aggregated statistics who is at the same time individually situated in a particular plot, mediates the tensions of an emergent statistical subjectivity that was materially instantiated in the New Deal era. By exploring these statistical tensions, Wright demonstrates both the power of statistics to reveal material social relations and their danger in the hands of an oppressive, racist, undemocratic state.

The Probable State of the New Deal

The relationship between the state and statistics has been largely understood as constitutive of the state's modern (administrative or bureaucratic) forms. Michel Foucault understands the biopolitical state as one typified by "mechanisms" such as "forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures" that are designed "not to modify any given phenomenon as such" but "to intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined, to intervene at the level of their generality."²¹ Ian Hacking understands liberal governance itself as profoundly statistical, writing that "we obtain data about a governed class whose deportment is offensive, and then attempt to alter what we guess are relevant conditions of that class in order to change the law of statistics that the class obeys."²² Such a model of governance, for Hacking, is rooted in the nineteenth century's "avalanche of printed numbers," as new technologies, bureaucracies, and evidentiary categories were developed to classify and enumerate populations. The result was a truly statistical society in which determinism had eroded and in which "it became possible to see that the world might be regular and yet not subject to universal laws of nature."²³ Rather than natural laws, society was governed by statistical regularities, which could only be ascertained via large-scale administrative apparatuses. Intervention at the level of these regularities (soon to become understood as *statistical laws*) is the characteristic trait of the liberal (Hacking) or biopolitical (Foucault) state.

The state's interest in collecting data and information may be nothing new, but the precise relationship between the state and statistics underwent unprecedented changes in the New Deal period; it is in this context that Wright's particular interventions must be understood. In his history of statistics, Alain Desrosières notes the distinct senses in which the term "statistics" is used: statistics is at once the administrative activity of states—their "construction of a political space of equivalence and encoding"—and a branch of mathematics rooted in probability calculus.²⁴ While these definitions have generally been understood as distinct activities with distinct histories, Desrosières claims that in the 1930s and 40s "the two traditions . . . converged in a construct henceforth endowed with two-fold legitimacy: that of the state and of science."²⁵ While the New Deal state's large-scale federal programs, top-down economic intervention, and mass enumeration of the population (via Social Security) certainly recall Foucault's biopolitical generalities, these activities were informed by newly probabilistic language and concepts: random sampling surveys, election forecasting, and the construction of new statistical objects such as the unemployment rate. The administrative state could never truly acquire perfect knowledge of itself (or its population), nor process this information quickly enough to keep up with the relentless instability of the present. While the mathematical techniques used in random sampling had been available in the nineteenth century, economists associated probability with "imperfect knowledge" before the 1930s.²⁶ The economic collapse of the Great Depression and the responsive rise of the New Deal state helped trigger a shift toward understanding probability as a means of transforming extant, imperfect data into actionable knowledge.²⁷ With probability, the state did not need to see everything; it could extrapolate a totality from much smaller sample sizes. The post-New Deal United States saw, Desrosières claims, "the right conditions not only for the federal territory to become more uniform, but also for it to be *thought of* as a pertinent totality, a space of equivalence, in both a political and a logical sense."²⁸ The state no longer needed to aspire toward knowing every individual, if the theories (soon codified as laws) of probability held true. This top-down, statistical prognostication would combine with practical systems of administration and surveillance to create a kind of perception by which a person was an individual datum that could be tracked and analyzed and, simultaneously, an aspect of a larger aggregated collective, governed by statistical laws.

A primary site of the New Deal state's statistical strategy was the management of unemployment. It is thus not surprising that chief among Bigger's determining social entanglements is his employment at the Dalton residence. Importantly, before Bigger has even entered the premises as his embodied self, he has already arrived in the form of a government case

report. To the government relief program and the Daltons themselves, Bigger's existence is primarily informatic; his physical body merely provides an additional datum for the Daltons to scrutinize. As Bigger approaches, he notices the property is enclosed by a "high, black, iron picket fence," a darker, sturdier, and more secure border than the generic white picket fence. The surrounding environment is defined by the exclusion of blackness: it is "a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded" (44). He only has access to this space as a worker, and while he is technically "free" to take the job, it is a false freedom: "Yes, he could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve" (12). Bigger has, in fact, been placed in the Daltons' house as part of an unspecified "relief" program, which the Daltons discuss in front of him: "Using the analysis contained in the case record the relief sent us, I think we should evoke an immediate feeling of confidence."²⁹ The novel initially presents Bigger's arrival as something immense, the crossing of a threshold into a world to which he was previously external, but the presence of the case record undercuts the idea that Bigger enters the Daltons' and is *subsequently* subjected to surveillance. Even his newly embodied presence must be supplemented by additional documentation, as Bigger is immediately asked for a record of his past involvements by Mr. Dalton—"Did you bring the paper?"—which he produces after an awkward two-page search, at which point he is interviewed about its contents (47). To gain admittance to this labor relationship, he must possess a document of his existence that is legible to the state.³⁰

As part of such a New Deal program, Bigger is rendered as what historian Dan Bouk calls a "statistical individual."³¹ As Bouk argues, from the rise of private insurance in the late nineteenth century to the Social Security program, individuals came to see and place themselves in relation to the massified collectivity of actuarial data in ways that did not erase their individuality but dynamically interacted with it. Bouk suggests that, for these individuals, being counted by the state produced feelings of pleasure and inclusion, even pride. The dynamic process through which the statistical individual was generated forces us to reconsider, as Michael Szalay does, how "Social Security made the state . . . a system of exchange essentially compensatory for human experience," rooted in "actuarial models of governance that revolved around the statistical construction of population groups, the calculation of probabilities for such groups, and the varied application of these probabilities to individual persons."³² The New Deal state's very capacity to *know* its population derived from these statistical practices of risk management. Such a process amounted not only to quantification but also to valuation. Whereas private insurance had known its customers/risks primarily in terms of vital statistics, Social Security "made economic lives visible in the aggregate and individual economic risks as calculable as vital risks," and as

a result “work registration became nearly as extensive as birth and death registration.”³³ The state began to generate a “new type of information” that could not be provided by a census: “individual inequalities” could now be “perceived on a national scale,” rendering the nation “a statistical sphere of equivalence and comparability.”³⁴ This “new type of information” allowed the state to generate new statistical objects like the unemployment rate. Rather than try to actually count the raw total of unemployed people, the state could extrapolate using the tools of random sampling.³⁵ The relief program Wright imagines in *Native Son* is the product of this method of governmentality.

Under this risk-based logic, the collectivity of Social Security was as structured by exclusion as inclusion. When Franklin D. Roosevelt inaugurated the Social Security Act with the hope that it would provide “some measure of protection to the average citizen,” he necessitated an accounting of precisely who counts as average.³⁶ As Szalay notes, the program “did almost nothing to help the Black community, which was crippled by an unemployment rate between 40 and 50 percent.”³⁷ While Black Americans were not de jure ineligible, the groups that were—domestic workers, agricultural laborers, the informally employed, the unemployed—disproportionately corresponded to the Black population, resulting in at least 60 percent of African Americans being initially excluded. As such, the Social Security Act not only represents the mass numbering and generation of statistical individuals; it inaugurates an active *unnumbering*. Under an explicit effort “to promote the general welfare,” this generality was implicitly tied to the working white male subject, in relation to whom others were rendered statistically exceptional.³⁸

By understanding blackness as the “outside” on which the “inside” inhabited by the white New Deal subject depends, we gain a different picture than that of an ultimately benign welfare state simply expanding into greater inclusivity. Indeed, we see a system structurally dependent upon “outsides” that might shift but cannot in fact be erased from a system based on the management of differentiated risk. It is as just such an internalized externality that Bigger’s supposed “entrance” into the Daltons’ household, prefaced by his informational record, must be understood. Even Bigger’s apparent lack of entanglement with the state takes the form of a different kind of entanglement, in which he is rendered as an unemployed surplus to be managed. This entrance diegetically registers Bigger’s extradiegetic status as a statistical composite that is fictionally retrofitted back into an individual personage. In this quasi state, Bigger, not as simulated individual but as statistically informed fictional construct, instantiates the ways the New Deal state formed and policed blackness through informatic processes that were largely invisible.

The Failure of Vision

The invisibility of this statistical process presents a representational problem for Wright. Bigger initially enters the Daltons' perception as a two-dimensional administrative record, but this record itself cannot be represented, particularly given the novel's perspectival fidelity to Bigger's psychology. Wright solves this problem via instances of *failed* visuality, through which the text explores the ambivalent affordances of being seen—or known—by the state. Through these moments of failed visuality, Bigger becomes aware of his own ongoing racialization (that is, his production as racialized data).

A particularly potent moment occurs when, fleeing the Daltons' home following the discovery of Mary's bones in the house furnace, he exits a streetcar, unfolds a newspaper, and looks at two photographs:

He went into the vestibule. A dim light glowed and his body was thankful for the meager warmth. He could finish reading the paper now. He unfolded it; then, for the first time, he saw his picture. It was down in the lower left-hand corner of page two. . . . It was a small picture and his name was under it; he looked solemn and black and his eyes gazed straight. . . . And, oh! Here was a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton standing upon the basement steps. That the image of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton which he had seen but two hours ago should be seen again so soon made him feel that this whole vague white world which could do things this quickly was more than a match for him, that soon it would track him down and have it out with him. (223–24)

Having found a space with the right mixture of lightness and darkness—the “dim light” that illumines his newspaper and warms his body without exposing it—Bigger sees himself rendered as an image “for the first time.” The picture, small with eyes that “gazed straight,” recalls the composition of the mug shot, which Shawn Michelle Smith has pointed to as a key guarantor of the photograph's capacity for identification. The photograph's “proliferation of surface signs” allows for the imagination of stable interior essences, with the photograph then “called upon to make such essences readable, apparent, knowable.”³⁹ But whereas portraiture photography came to define the nineteenth-century middle-class citizen's essence, the straightforward, scientific framing of the mug shot produced the criminal's identity not as a self-recognized essence but as “a point of distinction against which middle-class citizens could identify themselves.”⁴⁰ Wright's matter-of-fact prose, however—“he saw his picture”—suggests that, despite its small size and relegation to the paper's bottom corner, Bigger unambiguously recognizes the photograph as capturing himself in a way that Smith's nineteenth-century onlookers would have resisted. While this moment of recognition happening “for the first time” implies that something immense has occurred, Bigger is already trained—before the act of looking—to see

himself in the criminalizing gaze of the state. Thus, the passage does not seem to depict a “first time” but a culmination of the earlier processes that Smith analyzes. Bigger’s prerecognition of himself reflects the uneven distribution of this historical process and its emergent generalization: forged as a means of managing a racialized criminal element, the mug shot spread as a means of managing the population at large. Wright’s is a period in which the contestations of photographic identification had been more or less settled, where the act of seeing oneself as the state sees the criminal is barely worthy of comment, particularly for a Black subject for whom being seen by the state at all is equivalent to being criminalized.

Wright’s passage quickly exceeds Bigger’s interpellation as a racialized and criminalized subject, however, to focus on his imbrication in a network of information. In one of the novel’s most disquieting moments, Bigger’s attention shifts (“And, oh!”) to a second photograph—of the Daltons, an image Bigger “had seen but two hours ago,” which now confronts him again. Whereas the first photograph might guarantee a stable (if criminalized) essence for Bigger, the photograph of the Daltons confronts him as something monstrous, due not to its content or composition but to the speed with which it has been reproduced and disseminated. The focus of the passage is thus not on the state’s possession of Bigger’s likeness or that likeness’s capacity to identify him (which is taken as a given), nor on its possession of any particular *piece* of information. Bigger’s fate is sealed, in his mind, by the *speed* of information transmission, the infrastructural capacity of a “whole vague white world which could do things this quickly” to foreclose any possibility of escape through processes of collecting, copying, disseminating, and capturing. His conviction, one ultimately borne out by the novel, that “soon it would track him down and have it out with him” foretells the seemingly inevitable process by which the Chicago police will spread through the South Side, “armed with rifles, tear gas, flashlights, and photos of the killer,” culminating in his capture and execution by the state (244).

The photograph is a necessary but lacking metaphor in this process of informational apprehension, as Bigger enters into a relationship that both relies upon and exceeds visuality. Wright’s aesthetic relationship to photography has been understood as “primarily a documentary one as a production and recording of evidence.”⁴¹ While I agree that photography functions for Wright as a metaphor for “acquiring a new set of epistemological data,” these accounts do not fully explore how photography in *Native Son* fails in this task, in light of the nonvisual (or more-than-visual) nature of the emerging data of the New Deal era.⁴² Hence the passage’s blurring of photographic content in favor of focusing on the media’s circulation, vectors, and speeds. By depicting such rapid circulations of analog media, *Native*

Son captures an emergent sense of systemic enclosure (the lack of an “outside” to flee to) that would become omnipresent in twentieth-century US fiction, particularly in response to increasingly complex and inescapable technologies of identification and surveillance. Throughout the novel, Bigger finds himself delimited at every turn by systems designed to control, surveil, and contain a surplus population of (un)employed, racialized subjects, from the redlining practices of his landlord, Mr. Dalton, to the work program that places him in that same landlord’s employ. The photograph insufficiently metaphorizes these entanglements, but that very insufficiency points us toward the question of how exactly the state *is* seeing Bigger, which has material consequences not only for the state but for Bigger himself.

As discussed above, the New Deal state began to employ statistics, quantification, and probability in new and historically particular ways that Wright did not necessarily view as wholly negative. Yet such quantified methods remain linked to visibility, particularly the visual discretion of state actors (that is, census enumerators or the police). In regard to the US census, Michael Soto writes that an “individual’s race . . . was a matter strictly left to an enumerator’s presumably visual interpretation” up until 1970, “yield[ing] some difficult to fathom results.”⁴³ Once collected, however, this racial data circulated not as a visual encounter but as a piece of information ascertained by the state, compiled alongside other data as part of a statistical aggregate. It is upon such aggregated data that “the post-Depression era welfare state relies . . . for the allocation of resources.”⁴⁴ Such statistical and quantified methods become grafted onto localized, visual means of knowing; Bigger’s experience of the photograph thus mediates between these scales of perception. As an object of surveillance—which Simone Browne defines as “the prevention and management of risk through predictive or anticipatory means”—he is not only (visually) surveilled but *generated* as a risk to be so managed.⁴⁵ Bigger’s horrified gaze at the second photograph captures his sense that his subjective experience and perspective, which the novel privileges, is incapable of operating at the scale and speed of the state apparatus through which he circulates as racialized information.

For Wright, race cannot be separated from these processes of racialization, which are its positive content. He states in a 1953 interview that “when we speak of race . . . we speak, in fact, of a void which cannot be filled. . . . Race is a social myth, not a biological fact.”⁴⁶ As Paul Gilroy notes, Wright’s “anti-essential conception of racial identity . . . has proved to be an embarrassment for some commentators,” given the extent to which Wright’s canonical works’ prestige relied upon his supposedly “unchallengeable racial authenticity.”⁴⁷ Indeed, race seems very little in flux in *Native Son*. This apparent stability does not correspond to its ontological reality, however, but to its persistent determination in the text. As Karen and

Barbara Fields claim, “*race* in today’s biology is not a traditionally named group of people but a statistically defined population” maintained through racist processes that generate race rather than discover it.⁴⁸ Race, in this conception, is precisely *without* content; it is a shapeless and frictionless lack (of content, of medium). In such terms, it is similar to Claude Shannon’s conception of information itself, in 1948, as “a probability function with no dimensions, no materiality, and no necessary connection with meaning.”⁴⁹ In *Native Son*, blackness has no independent ontological presence, “no necessary connection with meaning,” but is continuously generated in structural codependency with the embodied white gaze and within an ever-present, ever-expanding network of information that constantly reproduces race both visually and nonvisually.

The Emergence of Visualization

Bigger encounters an even higher level of informational abstraction as he “watches” his own manhunt in something approaching real time, again in the newspaper, through a series of gradually shaded maps of Chicago’s South Side: “Shaded portion shows area already covered by police and vigilantes in search for Negro rapist and murderer. White portion shows area yet to be searched” (245). Bigger proves to be the “exception” that the state requires to exercise its power without restraint throughout the entire South Side, transforming it into a literal and figurative black space. The series of maps operates like a film, played one frame at a time, offering Bigger an abstract representation of the state’s gaze as it permeates more and more of his surroundings. This abstract permeation, however, enables Bigger to consider how the South Side was already produced as such a blackened space, through the redlining practices of figures like Dalton. In viewing the map, Bigger connects the individual experience of his manhunt to these larger social practices. He fantasizes that “if he had the whole city in which to move about” he just might escape, but “he knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the ‘line’” (249). While Bigger must futilely search for an exit out of the increasingly claustrophobic white space of the map, the movements of the police, not subject to the same spatial restrictions, are likened to the call of their omnipresent siren, which “seemed to sound a warning that no one could hide from it; that action to escape was futile; that soon the men with guns and gas would come and penetrate where the siren sound had penetrated” (257). Even prior to the exceptional occurrence of Mary Dalton’s murder, the Black Belt has been produced as a space that is always already subject to penetration.

The map and its supposed objectivity provide *Native Son* with a medium through which to problematize the objectivity of the state's "vision" of Bigger and the Black population generally. The map is particularly abstract, representing information through a simple binary code of black or white. The printed images represent an abstraction of myriad localized, individual police movements further mediated for Bigger through the newspaper and for the reader through Wright's narration of Bigger's thoughts and actions. As a thoroughly mediated image, the map is less a visual representation than a "visualization," a term Orit Halpern explains as the "formation of mental images of things 'not actually present in sight,'" especially in its modern usage, the task of "rendering practices by machines, scientific instrumentation, and numeric measures."⁵⁰ Despite its shared etymology with "vision," Halpern notes how the "multisensorial modes" of visualization collapse this correlation; visualization is rather "the language for the act of translation between a complex world and a human observer. Visualizations are about making the inhuman, that which is beyond or outside sensory recognition, relatable to the human being."⁵¹ Processes of visualization, which render distinctly nonvisual computational and numeric processes sensible to human cognition, use vision as a metaphor but are not reducible to exclusively visual representations—akin to how Wright uses photography and maps to register the larger totality outside their frames through their very incapacity to visually represent it. As a visualization, the map enables the viewer to comprehend (and Wright to represent) that which is otherwise "outside sensory recognition," namely, the multitudinous actions of the police.

The map further provides a means through which Bigger can understand himself in relation to larger informatic structures and through which the text can register the state's emerging methods of informatic power. The map not only tracks police movements through the black space but actively produces, albeit diminishingly, the white space as the zone of Bigger's likely location. The white space represents a probabilistic prediction of this location, gradually narrowing to a certainty. Within it, Bigger is both everywhere and nowhere in the view of the state; he is statistically distributed across the map until he is rendered, through localized capture and comparison with his photograph, to a particular zero point. Bigger himself engages in just this sort of probabilistic, numeric thinking, "calculating" the rate of the police's advance, concluding that "by midnight tonight they would be at Forty-eighth Street, or right here" (246). Through such calculation, he begins to perceive the nature of the quantifying entanglements that diegetically ensnare him and extradiegetically produced him. When the police finally apprehend him, photographs in hand, they are arresting not just Bigger's physical body but a sort of media celebrity, produced by the

interlocking systems of the state, capital, and mass media as the “20-year-old Negro rapist and killer of Mary Dalton” (256).

In arguing that *Native Son* is ultimately less interested in the visual than in a prefigurative visualization, I do not claim that the novel is not, in fact, profoundly visual but that it constantly runs up against the limits of the visual in its attempts to capture a process that exceeds visual terms. Statistical processes, with their numbers, equations, and probability theory, are not easily represented diegetically in a literary text. In representing the failure of the visual to fully account for the production of race, however, Wright directs our attention to these less apparent aspects of the “gaze,” of the ways Bigger comes to exist not only as a human being or even an objectified body but as an assemblage of racialized information. Such information, while abstract, has a material existence and force all its own. In this sense, the effect produced by the map’s representation of the police’s search—one of a solid encroaching blackness swallowing up the entirety of the South Side—is by no means purely figurative. The black squares printed on newspaper represent the material trace of a diffuse process whereby the void of race is inscribed, violently and abstractly. The map represents not only a metaphor of the state’s statistical gaze but also a literal example of the processes of abstraction through which it renders individuals into risks and probabilities. Writing before a conception of digital visualization could be represented in realist fashion, Wright nonetheless uses the formal qualities of the novel to represent the state’s perception. We might thus consider later technological developments less as technodeterminist causes of visualization than as *effects* of this ongoing need for the state to “see.”

“Certain Forms of Violence”: On Certainty and Prognostication

Understanding Bigger’s statistical presence in the novel helps us comprehend the novel’s central event—Mary’s death—as yet another representation of the abstract power of statistical probabilities. While Bigger’s sexual assault on Mary, so drunk she has to be carried to her bed, is unambiguously intentional, his subsequent suffocation of her—murder or horrible accident—has been a central point of contention in interpretations of the novel. As Addison Gayle notes, “the question . . . has provoked endless controversy,” due to Wright’s “attempting to make the crime appear both spontaneous and determined.”⁵² The statistical tensions of the novel become most knotted in the moment of her death. If an accident, *Native Son* threatens to become a novel of mere contingency, an impossibly tragic sequence of bad results. If an inevitability, it seems to become the harsh determinist tract its most disparaging critics claim it to be. Few analyses,

however, seem capable of strictly adhering to either of these options. In Frantz Fanon's reading, Bigger is undeniably an individual taking an action, albeit one in response to constant and inescapable tension: "In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. He acts to put an end to the tension, he answers the world's expectations."⁵³ Delimited by the novel's own determinism, Bigger acts *as an individual*, in such a way as to escape those determinations by giving into them. While this may seem logically contradictory, it accords with the statistical logic of the New Deal, which "understands individual action both as the result of an intention to act and as a predictable instance of structurally determined behavior patterns," producing subjects who are "both passive and active, isolate victims of circumstance and collectivized agents of their own salvation."⁵⁴ Mary Dalton's murder thus might be seen less as an irresolvable logical puzzle than as an attempt to explore the limits of the state's statistical logic.

We might conceive of the suffocation as, in fact, an accident but not in the colloquial sense. Paul Virilio describes the "integral accident" as events that do not come crashing into the world by chance but are actively produced by particular technologies: "To invent the sailing ship or steamer is *to invent the shipwreck*. . . . To invent the family automobile is to produce the *pile-up* on the highway."⁵⁵ That is, by producing the technology by which even an unlikely accident will eventually occur, such inventions in fact actively produce accidents (and, indeed, under the logics of capital, accidents of a certain probability and frequency as to maximize profits are totally acceptable). Insurance is the means through which the risk associated with these integral accidents is financially managed. Integral accidents might be traced not only to vehicles or nuclear bombs, however, but also to the very systems of risk management that seek to contain the accident. In this way, the various social systems designed to manage a "risk" such as Bigger and to theoretically prevent him from engaging in violence against whites—from the relief program managing his employment to the ever-present threat of lynching—create the very circumstances under which the murder occurs. As Szalay notes, Bigger is not afforded "the capacity to commit an accident" in his trial, but this is because Bigger is not so much an individual subjected to risk and probability as a figure composed out of them.⁵⁶ Hacking explains that "most of the law-like regularities" of statistics "were first perceived in connection with deviancy," and that "the roots" of a supposedly "neutral term" like information "lie in the notion that one can improve—control—a deviant subpopulation by enumeration and classification."⁵⁷ Wright's naturalistic universe is one not of total determinism but of statistically driven management, in which deviancy can be controlled but not eliminated and where the entrance of Black subjects into positions of (limited) success is necessarily possible *but also necessarily improbable*.⁵⁸

Native Son thus does not simply depict an individual, who happens to be a Black man, being subjected to processes that will render him a statistic. It formally considers the centrality of that subject position to the real social relations that those statistical processes imperfectly capture. These processes are concentrated in the nongaze of the blind Mrs. Dalton, whose entrance into the room precipitates Mary's suffocation. While Mrs. Dalton's inability to detect Bigger's presence pushes the limits of realism, this non-visual observation, which does and does not happen, corresponds to the insufficient visibility of the newspapers' photographs and maps. According with Cloutier's claim that "seeing is equated with knowing" in the text, this unknowing gaze actualizes the preexisting conception of Bigger as a risk.⁵⁹ Seeing without seeing, it captures the nature of the informatic state, which can only see (that is, process) what can be ascertained by the literal and figurative forms of its informational systems: in spite of its ample information, it does not really "know" anything if it cannot "see" the causes underlying statistical correlation.

For Wright, however, at issue is not statistics in themselves so much as their particular historical usage. Wright, in fact, yearns to be seen by the state, albeit differently. In his *Black Metropolis* introduction, he makes a forceful case for the clarificatory and predictive power of statistics:

Social discontent assumes many subtle guises, and a society that recognizes only those forms of social maladjustment which are recorded in courts, prisons, clinics, hospitals, newspapers, and bureaus of vital statistics will be missing some of the most fateful of the telltale clues to its destiny. What I mean is this: It is distinctly possible to know, *before it happens*, that certain forms of violence will occur.⁶⁰

Rather than desire to be invisible to the state, like Ellison's famous protagonist, Wright instead—shockingly, considering Bigger's victimization by state surveillance—asks for an *increased* scrutiny of the lives of Black Americans. This statement is troubling from a contemporary vantage point of mass surveillance, biometrics, and predictive policing, but, as Szalay notes, "during and immediately after the New Deal . . . Americans often felt most marginalized when they went unnoticed by the state."⁶¹ Wright's affective relationship to the state, particularly in the context of the exclusions of the New Deal, is one of neglect, and he finds this neglect rooted in the insufficiency of the state's statistical records. Figures like Bigger are contained in these records: indeed, we have seen Bigger, throughout *Native Son*, pass through the court, the prison, and the newspaper, and, following the novel's close and his execution, he will make his last entry into the bureau of vital statistics. But Bigger enters this record only as a subject of criminalization and management. Wright claims that a fuller explication of these statistics, of the kind his novel attempts, has the power to demonstrate that the

production of figures like Bigger can be foreseen. This production is not natural or inevitable: it is the product of material social realities that, Wright claims, can be addressed if they are understood as profoundly *unexceptional*. Wright's determinism, here, does not resign itself to fate but imagines fate as a material reality that can be altered. Bigger, as a racialized, deviant, criminalized figure, cannot be written off as an aberration or accident due to the very fact that the entire informational ontology of race depends upon his exceptionality—his deviance from the norm—so as to establish the normality from which he is deviant. He represents the necessary risk that has been quantified and contained within the statistical system. The “accident” of Mary's death is the product not of bad luck or a series of coincidences but of persistent structures. That is to say, while it is easy to disregard an individual accident as a contingent, exceptional happening, if we take a statistical perspective on these events, as Wright did, we see how these systems produce persistent probabilities that, in the *longue durée*, amount to a production of eventualities. If one can calculate an accurate probability, one can indeed know that “certain *forms* of violence” will occur, albeit not in regard to any one specific instance: that is, not everyone has to be Bigger Thomas, but, statistically, someone has to be.

In this way, Wright's work depicts, engages in, and problematizes the *formation* of information itself—racialized statistical data specifically, of the kind that was taking shape under the risk management logics of the New Deal state. Explicitly, in *Black Metropolis*, and implicitly, in *Native Son*, Wright does not call for the restoration of some direct, immediate world prior to the intervention of the state and its statistics. The universe of *Native Son* is wholly mediated. The forms that mediation takes, however, must be altered so society can recognize “the telltale clues to its destiny,” though this would require recognizing Black subjects as something other than risks to be managed. The will to so reconstitute the state will likely have to come from outside the state's perceptions. In his 1945 memoir *Black Boy*, Wright provides a powerful image of how the state's informational imperceptions might contain the radical potential to enact such alternative forms of organization. As he sits in a government relief office—of the very kind that might have placed Bigger Thomas in the Daltons' employ—and those waiting with him begin to talk to each other and “sense the collectivity of their lives,” the state's neglect threatens to form a consciousness that would not merely expand the welfare state's risk-based programs but radically redefine the nature of the state's collective project:

Did the relief officials realize what was happening? No. If they had, they would have stopped it. But they saw their “clients” through the eyes of their profession, saw only what their “science” allowed them to see. . . . To permit the birth of this new consciousness in these people was proof that those who ruled did not quite know what

they were doing, assuming they were trying to save themselves and their class. Had they understood what was happening, they would never have allowed millions of perplexed and defeated people to sit together for long hours and talk, for out of their talk was rising a new realization of life. And once this new conception of themselves had formed, no power on earth could alter it.⁶²

In this passage, Wright allows a utopian glimpse that his fiction cannot normally permit. Contained within his statistical project lies a truly radical exceptionality, produced by the state's neglect but taking form in ways that subvert its terms of legibility ("what their 'science' allowed them to see"). In this sense, I interpret Wright's supposedly "late" naturalism as, in fact, an uncomfortably "early" form that, on the doorstep of the information age, highlights these emerging issues and contradictions. *Native Son*, rather than presenting us with a definitive naturalist extrapolation of scientific data (though the text may be read as an attempt at such), aestheticizes the very tensions of individual free will and structural determinism that statistical narratives must navigate. In the context of larger caches of data than Wright could have imagined, his work points us toward the fact that *more data* will not change the system if that data is not properly interpreted and democratically controlled. He shows us that the field of struggle against an unjust state cannot be organized according to terms dictated by the state but must challenge that state—and its data—at the very level of its formation.

Notes

1. Quoted in Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge, 1990), 34.
2. Quoted in Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun (Chicago, 1993), xxix.
3. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 2005), 397. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text, and all references to *Native Son* are of this edition ("the restored text established by the Library of America") unless otherwise noted (see note 29).
4. Carla Cappetti, "Sociology of an Existence: Richard Wright and the Chicago School," *MELUS* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 25.
5. Richard Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, by St. Claire Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Jr. (Chicago, 1993), xviii.
6. *Ibid.*, xx.
7. Jean-Christophe Cloutier, *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature* (New York, 2019), 156–57.
8. Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," in *Native Son* (New York, 2005), 434.
9. *Ibid.*, 441.
10. *Ibid.*, 439.
11. James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, 1983), 15.

12. Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1964), 109.
13. *Ibid.*, 108, 114.
14. Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, "Alternative Readings of Bigger Thomas," in *The Politics of Richard Wright: Perspectives on Resistance*, ed. Jane Anna Gordon and Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh (Lexington, KY, 2018), 70.
15. Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst, 1987), 167. Even critical defenses of *Native Son* tend to rely upon a dichotomy between literature and statistics similar to the one that had been used against Wright. In such treatments, the critic discovers that, thankfully, the novel is not actually naturalist at all (and thus is worthy of the attention that has just been paid it). As in Michel Fabre's tellingly titled "Beyond Naturalism?," Wright's "scientific theories" prove not to "turn the novel into a scientific process.... On the contrary, they tend[] to subordinate and assimilate science to the imagination." See Michel Fabre, "Beyond Naturalism?," in *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson, MS, 1985), 71. Such criticism is able to "reveal the distance Wright put between *Native Son* and naturalism" and thus recover the novel's "literary innovation" and "artistry," saving the work from statistical reductionism. See John M. Reilly, "Thinking History in *The Man Who Cried I Am*," *Black American Literature Forum* 21, nos. 1–2 (1987): 28.
16. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998), 2. Of course, perception itself is never unmediated, at any level, but the issue for a state, whose means of perception are not sense organs but institutions, forms, bureaucrats, and countless other means, becomes significantly more complicated.
17. *Ibid.*, 3.
18. See Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC, 2015).
19. For treatments of these contemporary phenomena, which I argue Wright's work anticipates, see Jonathan Beller, *The Message Is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital* (London, 2018); Browne, *Dark Matters*; Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Seb Franklin, *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* (Minneapolis, 2021); and Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York, 2018). My understanding of Wright's use of informatic form is also influenced by Tom McEnaney's argument that Wright drew on another media form—the radio—in "an attempt to detach representations of African American speech from an ethnographic investment in authenticity, and to imagine a non-subject-centered form of speech." See Tom McEnaney, *Acoustic Properties: Radio, Narrative, and the New Neighborhood of the Americas* (Evanston, 2017), 19.
20. Cloutier, *Shadow Archives*, 22; Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960* (Princeton, 2010), 144.
21. Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York, 2003), 246.
22. Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 119.
23. *Ibid.*, 2–3, 1.
24. Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning*, trans. Camille Naish (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 13.

25. Ibid., 199.
26. Ibid., 163.
27. “This crisis [the Great Depression], and the political, economic, and administrative responses that Roosevelt’s government supplied after 1933, involved the construction of an entirely new public statistical system, relying mainly and for the first time on probabilistic techniques and on the sampling method”; *ibid.*, 194.
28. Ibid., 331.
29. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 1966), 48. Note that this passage, which appears in the original edition of *Native Son*, is absent from the currently in-print edition, referred to as “the restored text,” from which the other citations in this article are drawn.
30. Michael Szalay asserts that Bigger’s placement in the Daltons’ home is a “WPA [Works Progress Administration] relief” job, reflecting Wright’s biographical involvement with the WPA as a writer. See Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC, 2000), 217. Susan Edmunds disagrees, claiming it has no specific real-world referent but represents instead a “curious form of city-mandated private employment that condenses, in proleptic and fictional form, an array of long-term negative effects that more permanent New Deal legislation would have on African Americans.” See Susan Louise Edmunds, “‘Just Like Home’: Richard Wright, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the New Deal,” *American Literature* 86, no. 1 (2014): 74. According with Edmunds, I am less concerned with identifying the particular program Wright is imagining in this scene than with how that relief program indexes the New Deal state’s conception of unemployed Black men as a particular, statistically measurable population to be managed.
31. Dan Bouk, *How Our Days Became Numbered: Risk and the Rise of the Statistical Individual* (Chicago, 2018), 19.
32. Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 2.
33. Bouk, *How Our Days Became Numbered*, 223, 233.
34. Desrosières, *Politics of Large Numbers*, 208.
35. Specifically, the unemployment rate has been calculated since 1940 via the Current Population Survey, a monthly survey of approximately 60,000 US households, though the specific parameters of the calculation have changed over time. Desrosières credits this development to an urgent need for data in the 1930s in response to the Great Depression, when the census proved too ambiguous and slow a method. In the resulting struggle over its definition, he claims, “all the elements of the modern debate on unemployment had thus arisen in the space of a few months”; *ibid.*, 201.
36. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “Presidential Statement upon Signing the Social Security Act,” in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York, 1969), 4:324.
37. Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 213.
38. US Congress, United States Code: Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 301-1305 (Suppl. 4 1934), <https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1934-005042007>. Roderick A. Ferguson further explores how Social Security and other welfare benefits were implemented in ways that “worked to arrange men and women within heteropatriarchal family structures” and that, within racialized communities, “designated heteropatriarchal culture as the horizon of morality and agreeable culture and the ticket to minority assimilation.” See Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, 2003), 37–38.

39. Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, 1999), 5.
40. Ibid., 69.
41. Cloutier, *Shadow Archives*, 147. Wright's investment in photography in this sense is part of a generalized turn toward documentary aesthetics in the works Michael Denning identifies as "the cultural front," produced during a time when "settled social relations that provide the underpinning for realist narrative were themselves in crisis." See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2011), 119.
42. Cloutier, *Shadow Archives*, 160.
43. Michael Soto, *Measuring the Harlem Renaissance: The U.S. Census, African American Identity, and Literary Form* (Amherst, 2016), 89.
44. Ibid., 37.
45. Browne, *Dark Matters*, 15.
46. Richard Wright, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (Jackson, MS, 1993), 155–56.
47. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 149, 152. For representative examples of criticism that saw *Native Son*'s primary value as a source of unambiguous, factual data on the social reality of Black Americans, see Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," *Dissent* 10 (Autumn 1963): 353–68; and Dorothy Canfield Fisher's preface to the first edition, discussed in Hazel Rowley, "Framing Richard Wright," *Yale University Library Gazette* 73, nos. 1–2 (October 1998): 56–63.
48. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York, 2014), 5.
49. As paraphrased by N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, 1999), 18.
50. Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* (Durham, NC, 2014), 21.
51. Ibid., 21–22.
52. Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (Garden City, 1975), 170.
53. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, 2008), 118.
54. Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 206.
55. Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge, 2005), 10.
56. Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 220.
57. Hacking, *Taming of Chance*, 3.
58. Indeed, Wright embeds within *Native Son* a photonegative of Bigger's experience in the story of his predecessor at the Daltons', Green, who "stayed ten years" and then "took a job with the government" after "Mrs. Dalton made him go to night school" (55). Green follows the "proper" path of antagonistic development, albeit off the page. Wright *could have* told this story and, indeed, acknowledges the existence of figures like Green, but he also understands that the success of a Green structurally depends upon the same systems of exploitation and administration that generate Bigger.
59. Cloutier, *Shadow Archives*, 160.
60. Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis*, xxvi–xxvii.
61. Szalay, *New Deal Modernism*, 22.
62. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York, 2005), 300–301.