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## Writing Through the Lower Frequencies: Interpreting the Unnaming and Naming Process Within Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Sarah M. Lacy  
*Cleveland State University*

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WRITING THROUGH THE LOWER FREQUENCIES: INTERPRETING THE  
UNNAMING AND NAMING PROCESS WITHIN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE  
SON* AND RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

SARAH M. LACY

Bachelor of Arts in Literature and Film Studies

University of Delaware

May 2010

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

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at

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May 2017

THIS THESIS IS HEREBY APPROVED FOR

SARAH M. LACY

candidate for the Master of Arts in English

degree for the Department of English

&

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S

College of Graduate Studies by

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Dr. Julie Burrell

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department & date

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Dr. James Marino

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department & date

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Dr. Adam Sonstegard

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department & date

25 April 2017

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**ABSTRACT**

The search for identity within Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* has long been analyzed, yet the fact that each protagonist's search for self is brought to a point of crisis during an intimate interaction with a white woman has often been neglected. Here, I analyze each author's strategic use of a nameless narrator by utilizing the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, arguing that the act of "literary unnamings" is used to critique the development of black American identity during the time of Jim Crow. The use of a nameless narrator is explored through "the unnamings and naming process," which I situate as symbolic of the historical unnamings of the African people, who were subjected to naming and cultural stripping during the time of slavery. Each narrator's scene with a white woman (Mary in *Native Son* and Sybil in *Invisible Man*) is critiqued in order to highlight the most intimate unnamings and naming process, and is identified as the narrator's catalyst that begins the re-claiming of his unnamed state, identified here as the "re-naming" process.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the nameless narrator begins his story by simply stating: "I am an invisible man." This statement represents the complex association that a sense of self has to a name, and the psychological ramifications that the denial of a true name can have on an individual. In Ellison's novel and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), each author has left his narrator without a traditional name; Ellison's narrator is famously left unnamed, while Wright's Bigger Thomas is only afforded a nickname, a move which is strategically left unknown to the reader until the last third of the novel. This literary act provides a critique of America's historical formation of individual black identity as having been influenced and developed through white appropriation, also known as the white gaze; the negative effects of this act are being explored in each novel, and is symbolically represented by each narrator being left nameless. Additionally, leaving a narrator without a defined name enhances each narrator's impending feeling of social invisibility. This lack of a name is one of the many constructs that connects the narratives of each novel, where both Bigger and Ellison's narrator (henceforth the "Narrator") are confronted directly with the white gaze and its influence on their personal sense of self. Throughout the course of each novel, each is

attempting to avoid living as “socially invisible”: Bigger often muses that what he fears most is to “not be seen” by the white world, while the Narrator is attempting to gain entry into the employment opportunities of white men, only to be misused or turned away. Wright and Ellison are critiquing the formation of individual identity and search for self-possession into their novels by leaving their narrators without a “legal American” name: each author goes to extraordinary literary lengths in order to keep their characters unnamed, creating a warning that accepting an identity which has been manipulated by outside influences will lead to social and personal invisibility.

What I call “literary unnamings” is the act of not providing the protagonist of a novel a name in order to conduct an emblematic critique of the development of black identity in America. In each novel, Wright and Ellison have utilized this technique in order to explore the influence of the historical unnamings and naming process during American slavery on their contemporary state of black identity. Literary unnamings symbolically encompasses this historical unnamings and naming process in which a black American must perceive of his or her own identity, while also recognizing that which is projected onto him or her by white America. The dichotomy between these two perceived identities results in the lack of a true sense of self, and has most famously been defined as “double consciousness” by W.E.B. Du Bois; the historical unnamings and naming process was used to suppress the identity of a slave, and has been projected onto current African Americans since the dismantling of slavery. By way of Wright and Ellison’s narrators, literary unnamings is employed to analyze this unnamings and naming process in the decades after slavery, commenting on the contemporary state of race relations in America. Just as the African was stripped of his or her original name and identity once



brought to America (unnaming), so too have Bigger and the Narrator been denied the ability to construct their own name and identity within each novel. In my argument I state that literary unnaming is being used by Wright and Ellison to explain how the projection of white society's own ideals onto the narrator's sense of self, relates to the historical act of the slave being supplied with the slave master's own last name (naming) after being unnamed. Wright and Ellison guide their readers through the complications that arise from each narrator's recognition of this unnaming and naming process, with the goal of entering re-naming; in the course of each novel, the narrator is confronted with the unnaming and naming process, leading to the realization that he needs to develop his own self-possessed identity. I argue that through the incorporation of literary unnaming, it is shown that Bigger and the Narrator must truly acknowledge how society has unnamed and named them in order to be able to re-claim, or "rename," their identity. Each time Bigger or the Narrator come in contact with a member of the white world who refuses to recognize his individual identity and instead addresses him with a stereotype, they are effectively unnaming and then naming him with an identity that is separate from his personal self. The re-naming process is the driving force of each novel that propels Bigger and the Narrator towards his respective literary end in order to undo each act of unnaming and naming, so that they can begin to see themselves as existing without the influence of the white gaze.

The historical unnaming and naming process that is being examined as symbolically represented by the literary unnaming in each novel, begins with the American enslavement practices in which the African was stripped of his or her name (unnaming), and subsequently given the slave master's name in order to define the individual as

property (naming). Vincent Brown has expanded this literal unnamings and naming process to also include the stripping and replacing of identity, defining this act as that “in which slaveholders annihilated people socially by first extracting them from meaningful relationships that defined personal status and belonging, communal memory, and collective aspiration and then incorporating these socially dead persons into the masters’ world” (1233)<sup>1</sup>. Brown’s study of historical African American identity links the act of literal unnamings to the act of forcibly removing a people from their heritage and cultural identity; this led to a state of identity in the twentieth century that contains a past associated with oppression, a presence which began the need for a cultural re-claiming and re-naming.

The narrative importance of literary unnamings is in its ability to critique the power associated with the name itself and the way an individual identifies him or herself through that name: a name is the marker of both an individual’s personal and historical identity. This assertion complicates the reasoning for Wright and Ellison to leave their narrators without a name, and provides insight into the authors’ own ideas regarding the re-naming process. The ritual of providing an individual a name is an act of political and social power: Sigrid King has stated that “from their earliest experiences in America, Afro-Americans have been made aware that those who name also control, and those who

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<sup>1</sup> In “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” Brown is reviewing Orlando Patterson’s monumental work *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), in order to complicate the recent trend of cutting his work down to simply redefining slavery as “social death.” Brown is concerned with highlighting the theoretical abstraction contracted through Patterson’s “breathtaking surveys” in order to undo the idea that “social death” simply defines slavery, and to instead state that Patterson’s work is meant to “explain the existential condition of the enslaved” (1234). This historical reading sheds light on the inherent construct that historical oppression can have on the future conditions of individuality and identity of that oppressed population. This construct provides the historical basis for a literary technique such as literary unnamings, in which an author is searching for a way to provide insight regarding an understanding of his or her own identity.

are named are subjugated” (683). Many believed that by keeping a name that may be associated with a past slave owner, that person is giving power to the slavery of the past. The way that Wright and Ellison utilize literary unnamings through their nameless narrators, can be seen as a prediction of the social movement of personal re-naming which occurred after the publication of each novel. This movement was publicly endorsed by the Black Nationalist movement, dominantly by Malcolm X; Malcolm asserted that the only way he saw to undo his own unnamings and then naming of the past, was to permanently re-name himself in order to erase the trace of his enslaved ancestry. In a speech discussing his decision to remove his last name of “Little” to be replaced with an “X,” Malcolm stated that

The real names of our people were destroyed during slavery. The last name of my forefathers was taken from them when they were brought to America and made slaves, and then the name of the slave master was given, which we refuse, we reject that name today and refuse it. I never acknowledge it whatsoever<sup>2</sup>.

Malcolm X and the 1960s Black Nationalist movement believed that keeping a name that is directly related to a history that once enslaved their community, is continuing to give power to the society that was once their oppressors<sup>3</sup>. The re-naming process then becomes a method of re-identification, one that if an individual is allotted the opportunity to decide a name for him or herself, can also change his or her association with the past. The ability to take control of one’s past is the essence of self-possession: in order for an individual to have control over a name, he or she needs the power to recognize and then

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<sup>2</sup> This quote is taken directly from a speech Malcolm X gave in 1963 while appearing on *City Desk*, a local talk show in Chicago. Malcolm X made this statement while being asked to discuss why he decided to change his name, and whether he considered it his “legal” name, to which he responded “As far as I am concerned it’s my legal name.”

<sup>3</sup> This information and more can be found in *Identities and Issues in Literature*, volume 2 “Emigration and Immigration,” edited by David Peck.

alternately discard the elements of a past that would keep a new identity from truly forming. This process of re-naming structures Wright and Ellison's novels as necessary; re-naming removes the subjugating power of the original unnamings and naming process by taking the control of one's identity away from the appropriation of white society. This re-naming thus removes the central control that the naming of the past has over the formation of black American identity present in the first half of the twentieth century.

My intervention into the history of names and the naming process is to analyze literary unnamings and the discourse around the unnamed narrator. A name is a symbol that can signify an individual's being, both past (surname) and present (first name); literary unnamings symbolically represents the historical unnamings and naming process, showcasing how it has influenced the formation of black identity in America. By utilizing the literary unnamings model, I assert that Wright and Ellison created characters that represent the current outcome that denying a person's African heritage and inserting the slave master's name, has had on their contemporary community. Literary unnamings thus transcends literary structure to create social commentary on the identity of a community of people whom each author believed needed further definition and discussion. This latter fact drives the course of each novel, and structures the progression of *Bigger* and the Narrator towards redefining their own unnamings and naming in order to move towards re-naming, where they can define their own social identity. It is through this emblematic process that Wright and Ellison are expressing their own relationship to the state of black identity during the time of Jim Crow segregation in which their novels were published.

Bigger and the Narrator's nameless state is defined within *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* by the very lack of a legal name; Debra Walker King insists that "by reading through names and naming, a researcher can go beyond explanations of symbols and symbolism and examine how names function as radical strategies of discourse production" (181). To this end, I will examine what happens when the characters are left without a name; King's argument will be reworked to examine the other side of literary names to evaluate what happens to those not afforded that gesture. When each narrator in *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* operate throughout the text with no name, they are entering society without a past in which they can attach their identity. When speaking of this importance of names and history, Ellison himself stated in his essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," that names "must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past" (148). By leaving his narrator unnamed Ellison is denying the narrator's past, separating it from the person his narrator wishes to be. The same can be said of Wright's Bigger, who is afforded a nickname that abusively associates itself with "Nigger," a naming technique that dehumanized and subverted an individual during the original unaming and naming process. This chosen nickname highlights the ability of the American past to influence the current society of Wright's novel, and defines Bigger's inherent unaming as determined by the white gaze. Ellison continues to explain in his article how the concept of names for the African American community has a deeper, more complex association with that history. For this community, their names represent a history of enslavement, and are directly associated with those who conducted the enslaving, much like the nickname of "boy" or "Bigger," which deny an individual a

respectable designation into the given community and keeps them unnamed. Many critics, both literary and sociological, have argued that the modern move to restructure the naming process for the African American has become a symbol of power, a way to take control of the past and redefine oneself within modern history; it is this assertion that has led to the necessity to read each novel as developing and promoting the re-naming process.

The power that is allotted to a name and the unnamings and namings process goes beyond history, and influences an individual's psychological and social state. Du Bois pinpoints this concept of identity that the African American has developed in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), stating that "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (2). Like Bigger and the Narrator, Du Bois is situating the African American as an Other, as designated by the white world. In literary terms, this veil of double consciousness has been manifested by the white society of each novel; I assert that the unnamings and namings process presented within each novel both creates and perpetuates Du Bois's veil of double consciousness. The presence of the veil is represented by the unnamings and namings process, showcasing the constriction that is put upon Bigger and the Narrator which causes them to be self-conscious while inhabiting white society, and limits their ability to fully identify themselves without white influence. Each narrator is confronted by the unnamings and namings process many times throughout each narrative through the application of a racial stereotype; it is within these instances that the veil of double consciousness is presented as a divisive technique that reminds each narrator that

they are seen as existing separately from the white world. Wright and Ellison are showcasing double consciousness by having their narrators interact with the white world; these interactions allow each narrator to be confronted with the unnamings and namings process, and recognize how he has been forced to exist simultaneously through his own perception of self and through the white appropriation of that self.

When interacting with a white woman, each narrator is confronted intimately with this unnamings and namings process through the application of a racial stereotype; in a vulnerable scene, a white woman projects her ideals of black identity onto the narrator, causing him to recognize his social invisibility as those ideals contradict his own view of self. It is at this point within the discussion of Wright and Ellison's use of literary unnamings, that Frantz Fanon's work in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) can help shape my assertion that each author utilizes a white female character in order to provide a chance for unnamings and namings to occur in an intimate setting. I propose that it is due to the vulnerable nature of each narrator's scene with Mary in *Native Son* and Sybil in *Invisible Man*, that the unnamings and namings conducted has the deepest effect on Bigger and the Narrator, allowing for the beginning of the re-namings process. Fanon explores the psychological aspirations associated with an interracial relationship, arguing that the liaison may "represent for the colored spouse a kind of subjective consecration to wiping out in himself and in his own mind the color prejudice from which he has suffered so long" (53)<sup>4</sup>. Here, Fanon is theorizing that in many interracial relationships, a man of color is unconsciously attracted to the white woman because he identifies being with her

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<sup>4</sup> In this section Fanon is utilizing the work of Louis T. Achille, who made this statement during a speech to the Interracial Conference of 1949 (52). Fanon is critiquing the sexual dynamic within an interracial relationship, and is using this discussion of marriage to set the psychological constructs that may define the interactions between men of color and a white woman.

as undoing the oppression afforded to him by his colored skin. By being with her, he can begin to experience the way a white man lives, thus undoing his personal suppression that has been forced upon him by the unnamings and namings process conducted by that same white society he now sees himself inhabiting.

In each novel, the white woman is presented as a means by which the narrator is confronted with the white gaze in its most intimate setting; this recognition is exposed through social misconception (Mary) and sexual stereotyping (Sybil), in which each woman is gazing upon the narrator and only seeing each man in the way she desires. Fanon takes the romantic dynamic of interracial relationships a step further, and evaluates its more primal physical component in order to dissect the root of the sexual stereotypes associated with black males. Fanon identifies this stereotype as a thought perpetuated by white women who “invariably see the black man at the intangible gate leading to the realm of mystic rites and orgies, bacchanals and hallucinating sexual sensations” (154). By taking the unnamings and namings process down to its most intimate state, Wright and Ellison cause each narrator to be confronted with the white perception that “the black man represents the (uneducated) sexual instinct” and “embodies genital power out of reach for morals and taboos” through an interaction with Mary and Sybil respectively (Fanon 154). Both women create a circumstance in which the narrator is confronted with this black male stereotype that designates each man as a sexual Other, operating outside the “norm” that each woman is defining through their individual treatment of each narrator. While helping a drunk Mary into her bedroom, Bigger is forced to confront the fact that by being in her room he may be labeled as a rapist by white society regardless of his actions, while Sybil projects the black-rapist stereotype directly onto the Narrator by



claiming her rape-fantasy should be “easy” for him to perform (Ellison 518). Combining Fanon’s analysis of interracial relationships and sexual stereotypes, the scenes in which Mary and Sybil directly interact with each narrator are discovered as rooted in the cultural variances that Wright and Ellison use to propel the unnamings and namings process beyond social identity, and towards its psychological associations to identity. Through stereotyping, each narrator is effectively unnamed and then named in order to fulfill the woman’s pleasure during a vulnerable scene; yet, it is because he has been able to interact with a white woman as many white men have, that each narrator is able to initiate the re-claiming of his identity in order to undo that suppressive unnamings and namings process.

The search for a self-made identity guides the narrative of each novel; Mary Dalton in *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*’s Sybil, as understood through Fanon’s psychological outlook, are used by Wright and Ellison to explore the possibility of identity undoing and creation through an intimate act. By being confronted with personal stereotypes that cause each narrator to question the way each woman is identifying him and the way that perception affects his own sense of self, each narrator begins to understand how his own sense of self is undefined. Each woman presents herself to the narrator as an “ally,” claiming that she believes she can “trust” the narrator to give her what the white men in her life cannot. Each claim inadvertently causes the narrator to be confronted with his own social invisibility, as the woman’s perception of each narrator’s identity contradicts his own. By exploring the literary unnamings process through an intimate scene in which each narrator is more vulnerable than previously seen in each novel, I claim that Wright and Ellison are using the white women in order to bring each narrator to a feeling of true

objectification through sexual stereotyping. Re-naming then becomes a means to undo that distortion to his own personal identity, and leads the narrator towards an acceptance of the influence that the unnamings and namings process has had on his personal identity.

## CHAPTER II

### THE NAMING OF THE UNNAMED NARRATOR

Ellison begins his novel by stating very clearly how and why his Narrator has decided to give in to the social invisibility that has been forced upon him by his current society, and is represented through literary unnamings. In the prologue, Ellison's Narrator begins his story by simply stating: "I am an Invisible man" and continues to make clear that he is not "literally" invisible, but that he is invisible "simply because people refuse" to see him, and that it is as if he "has been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass" (Ellison 3). This metaphorical version of invisibility lends itself to a Du Boisian interpretation in which the double consciousness of African America is defined by the white world's projection of a certain view of the African American, which conflicts with the personal identity of the individual. This forced view has caused the Narrator to question the way that he understands his identity, as his awareness of the unnamings and naming process has caused him to recede underground. The Narrator takes this emotional construction further, and lays out the exact way he feels:

That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come into contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality... you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds (Ellison 3-4).

Through an introduction between the Narrator and his reader, Ellison is constructing a literal scenario in which Du Bois's double consciousness has affected an individual, to the point that he has decided to give into his "invisibility" and live underground. The bulk of the novel is concerned with the development of the Narrator's feeling of subjection; however, at the beginning of the novel the reader is provided a sense that the Narrator has accepted this invisible status. It is for this very reason that I argue Ellison's decision to leave his Narrator nameless constitutes a deeper social interpretation, as to offer his character a name would undo the influence that feeling invisible to white society has had on the Narrator and his position within the world of the novel. The Narrator has accepted that on the white side of the social veil, he is not clearly seen; so he removes himself from that society in order to construct a sense of self that is entirely his own. During the course of the novel he has not yet defined that identity, therefore giving him a name would be disingenuous.

For Wright's *Bigger Thomas*, his nameless state as perpetuated by the author is more interpretive and not as easily accessible to the reader as in Ellison's novel. Unlike *Invisible Man*, Wright provides his protagonist the nickname "Bigger" that the reader takes to be his real name throughout the majority of the novel. It is not until the beginning of his murder trial that the reader learns that "Bigger" is not his legal name: during the opening of the trial, Boris Max, Bigger's white lawyer, begins his defense by claiming

"Your Honor, let me state once again that this poor boy, Bigger, enters a plea of guilty..."

"I object!" Buckley shouted. "I object to the counsel for the defendant speaking of this defendant before the Court by any name other than that written in

the indictment. Such names as ‘Bigger’ and ‘this poor boy’ are used to arouse sympathy...”

“Sustained,” the judge said. “In the future, the defendant should be designated by the name under which the indictment was drawn” (Wright 375).

It is within the quotations marks that surround “Bigger” that it is revealed to the reader that the name given to the protagonist is a nickname. After this discourse, however, the reader is never provided with his legal name. Much like Ellison’s Narrator, Wright has taken pains to hide the true name of his character from the reader.

The nickname and lack of a name define Wright and Ellison’s novels while simultaneously commenting on the racist ideologies of naming practices in America during the Jim Crow era in which each novel was published. The feeling of abject social denial is implied when identity is withheld, thus bringing shape to the veil which Du Bois and Fanon identify as a result of various forms of cultural suppression, defined here as the state of being unnamed then named through white appropriation. Denying a name in which the narrators could be seen as being a part of current society, provides the reader a glimpse into the social ramifications of double consciousness; by not having a name, the narrators read as operating outside of the society in each novel, mirroring the author’s critique of social invisibility. Both Wright and Ellison use their fictive narratives to showcase the fact that the African American is not allowed the same freedom in a name and the naming process as a white American; therefore, the assigning of a name would be a flawed endeavor as each narrator has not yet conducted the process of re-naming.

Reading the literary unnamings technique as being used to symbolically represent each narrator’s feeling of being socially designated as Other due to the unnamings and naming process, brings a fresh perspective to the scenes that structure both *Bigger* and the

Narrator's narrative beginning. For the Narrator, he begins at the end of his journey, attempting to work backwards in order to give the reader a full understanding of why he has chosen to give into his social invisibility. Ellison's Narrator began developing a recognition of the unnamings and namings process put upon him by his white superiors while at college, and proceeded to engage with its confines while in New York. For Bigger, the awareness of his state as Other to white society is heightened when he enters the Dalton home and is confronted with the stark differences in the way that the Daltons lived, as compared to his family in the Black Belt. Each instance ignites a feeling of fear and resentment within the narrators, which follows them through their narrative inevitably leading to their time with a white woman. The differences within the narratives of these two novels provide two separate perspectives to the way that one may develop an awareness of the unnamings and namings process, yet are similar enough to afford continuity to a reading of each narrative together. Both narratives begin to take shape when the narrator begins to question his place within society, specifically the differences between being black and white in America. When Bigger and the Narrator are confronted with these social differences by directly interacting with the white world, the unnamings and namings process is made clear and the need for re-naming is presented as a means for each to escape certain racial stereotypes.

In order to create a well-rounded critique of the unnamings and namings process, the literary unnamings technique must be analyzed as not solely allotted to Wright and Ellison's narrators: the head of each narrator's family is also left strategically nameless. To tie this state of unnamings and namings within a developmental context, Fanon analyzes the family and formulation of the child of color's social identity by restating the work of

Joachim Marcus, saying that for the white family, “the individual assimilates every authority encountered at a later date with paternal authority: he perceives the present in terms of the past” (122). This ideal, however, is not the same for a black child. Fanon concludes that “a normal black child, having grown up with a normal family, will become abnormal at the slightest contact with the white world” simply because the worlds have been kept segregated (122). Therefore, as white society dominates much of Western culture, the black identity is inevitably left to be the Other, yet is not conscious of this fact until forced to interact with the white world. This is the point of crisis that begins the narratives of both Bigger and the Narrator, as stated above, through the un-naming and naming process. This is made clear by the decisive way that Wright and Ellison construct the nomenclature of both Bigger and the Narrator’s family: as Fanon’s work analyzes the role segregation has on the way a black child will hesitantly interact with the white world, Wright and Ellison are making the difference in family structure clear as the head of each narrator’s family is also left nameless, while each white family member is fully named. In *Native Son*, Bigger’s mother is referred to as “Ma” by her children, and as “the mother” or “Bigger’s mother” in the prose of the novel; like his main character, Wright has only afforded this character a moniker rather than indicating her legal name. Similarly, each instance in which Ellison’s Narrator reflects on the memory of his grandfather, the man is only referred to by this nominal gesture. The head of each family is then left un-named in a calculated pattern that perpetuates the perception of the African American un-naming and then naming process going back to the origin of the family, presumably to the un-naming and naming during slavery. This construction of the family indicates the cycle of un-naming and naming by strategically leaving the nameless

narrator's familial figurehead equally undefined. Each narrator is then perceived as born into the state of being unnamed.

In *Native son*, once Bigger is born into the society that has embraced his own unnamings and namings, he inhabits the action of each novel, attempting to see his way beyond the confines of his invisible self-identity. Bigger's revelation of his own invisibility is enlightening to the evolution of his character, yet does not afford the sense of hope and re-emergence that Ellison's Narrator expresses at the end of *Invisible Man*. It is important to heed the words of James Nagel, who proposes in his article "Images of 'Vision' in *Native Son*" that Wright's book transcends a mere fictional crime novel, and is rather "an analysis of 'perception' which documents the effects prejudice, alienation, oppression, and isolation have on one's ability to 'see' and 'be seen' clearly" (109). What Nagel is expanding on in this interpretation is that Wright focuses his narrative choices around Bigger's search to be seen, indicating that his natural state is a feeling of invisibility. This feeling of invisibility towards white society is in essence his unnamings and namings. Wright provides evidence to this claim by affording him the nickname of "Bigger" as a direct reminder of the term "Nigger" which is used as its own unnamings technique by white society; Kimberly Benston identifies this racial slur as "a mechanism of control by contraction; it subsumes the complexities of human experience into a tractable sign while manifesting an essential inability to see (to grasp, to apprehend) the signified" (5). The use of this name assigns to the recipient the feeling of being unseen, or 'invisible' to the person supplying the name. Wright is playing with this slur by designating his narrator as "Bigger," a move that is understood through Nagel's comments as a way to conjure this feeling of being unnamed and then named through an



outside perception. This nickname works to situate Bigger alongside each member of the African American community who has been determined by such names as “boy” and various nominal sidesteps that aim to deny them an identity, thus being positioned as the Other to those that refuse to utilize their proper name.

The suppling of a potentially vulgar nickname instead of a proper name designates this concept of unnamings and namings to the social realism construct that dominates Wright’s novel, and serves as a separating point between his work and *Invisible Man*. Where it is now clear that Wright wished to provide a realistic narrative which critique the racial issues of the early twentieth century, Ellison took a different approach. Lawrence P. Jackson, a Wright and Ellison scholar, has noted that though he “publicly endorsed Richard Wright’s sledgehammer blows aimed at uncovering the horror of African-American life, Ellison started to generate strong criticisms of fellow black writers who attempted the same approach” (72). According to Jackson, Ellison “became increasingly suspicious of realistic writers who failed to produce a protagonist capable of vaulting their circumstances” giving credence to the hopeful reading that the Narrator will be able to undo his own unnamings and namings process (72). In order to truly present a narrator who can capture an illustration of the African American experience within the unnamings and namings process, Ellison needed to write a narrative full of situations that exploited the process. In order to stay away from Wright’s realistic motifs that he was hesitant to trust, the surreal nature of such scenarios as the interaction with Sybil bring truth to the claim that Ellison wished to experiment with modernist form in order to provide his reader with an account of his Narrator’s journey that went beyond mere interpersonal conversations, and began to investigate the inner workings of the conscious and

unconscious mind. By creating a narrator who is unapologetically nameless, Ellison is taking the idea of hidden names present in Wright's novel, and making the process an explicit construct of his Narrator's characterization. In this way, Ellison's novel is seen as building on Wright's racial conversations that brought the veil of double consciousness to light through a social realism structured narrative.

Now that each narrator's nameless state has been proposed as a construct of the literary unnamer technique in Wright and Ellison's novels, each narrator's interaction with a white woman will be analyzed as the conduit in which the narrator is both confronted with his cultural unnamer and naming, and presented with an opportunity to interact directly with white society. In this next section, I will argue that the white women present the authors with an opportunity to have their narrator embrace white society intimately, but in a way that ensures they are still not fully accepted. The white woman, though white, is still not accepted within the same range of power as the white man; therefore, she represents a marginalized position within white society, allowing her to appear more accessible to each narrator than a white man. Each narrator begins his interaction with the white woman by identifying her beyond the realm of simple human interaction; Mary is viewed on a movie screen, while Sybil is presented as a loose woman whom Ellison's Narrator believes will be the easiest target to elicit information about the Brotherhood. Each narrator sees the woman as both separate to and a part of white society, a dueling identity he himself is struggling to navigate.

### CHAPTER III

#### MARY, SYBIL, AND THE UNNAMING AND NAMING PROCESS

In *Native Son*, Mary Dalton tells Bigger Thomas, “I think I can trust you... I’m on your side,” a sentiment that is echoed in *Invisible Man* when Sybil drunkenly confides in Ellison’s narrator that “you’re not like other men. We’re kind of alike” (Wright 64, Ellison 520). In these two short discourses, Wright and Ellison identify the definitive disconnect between his narrator and the white woman: Mary and Sybil fail to recognize their projection of racial stereotypes onto the narrators, which in turn initiates the unnamings and namings process. Each woman mistakes the narrators’ as representing the whole of black America, destabilizing each personal identity. Each narrators’ subsequent reaction of anger to that misidentification represents the African American’s supplemental resentment of the white world, wherein Mary and Sybil are proving the unnamed state of each narrator. By having each narrator interact with a white woman, Wright and Ellison are presenting the unnamings and namings process, and providing the ability to re-name themselves as a comment on the relationship of the black to white community. The anger felt towards the unnamings and namings by these women is strong enough to cause each narrator to take a step towards re-naming themselves away from the stereotype by acting purely of their own freewill; for Bigger, his fear led to murder which

in turn allows him to acknowledge that he does not need to be invisible to the white world, while the Narrator is able to physically and textually declare an identity that rejects the one Sybil is projecting onto him through her insistence that he participate in her rape-fantasy.

Mary and Sybil approach Bigger and the Narrator in order to embrace the other side of the cultural veil, believing that in doing so each woman can undo her own suppression that has been visited upon her by the white male world; it is through the misidentification of Bigger and the Narrator's identity that Mary and Sybil inadvertently create a need for him to re-claim his identity. Mary is attempting to rebel against her father by sympathizing with the communist party, an action that leads her to behave towards Bigger with an air of familiarity that causes Bigger discomfort to the point of anger. Sybil, is aiming to utilize the Narrator more intimately in order to enact a rape fantasy she claims only the Narrator can satisfy. Each woman is using the narrator in order to achieve the satisfaction they cannot obtain from white men, in the same manner that each narrator is interacting with these white women in order to experience the power of the white world. It is within this disconnect that neither interaction yields the woman's desired outcome due to their unnamings and namings of the narrator. Mary and Sybil are projecting their own ideals of black identity onto Bigger and the Narrator, denying to truly understand each; by doing so, each woman is challenging the narrator's sense of self by only seeing him in a way that fits her individual needs. It is through the anger felt by each narrator towards the woman for unnamings and namings him with her specific white gaze, that each is brought to a point of dissatisfaction with the way they are being seen and treated. This dissatisfaction causes each narrator to recognize the need to initiate his

re-naming process so that they can move beyond the constrictions put upon their identity by Mary and Sybil. The presence of Mary and Sybil signify Wright and Ellison's perception of the re-naming concept, providing insight into the act of self-identifying as a personal exploration that goes beyond simply providing his narrator a name. The dichotomy between racial and gender differences, however, is not enough to complete the narrator's re-naming, as is shown through the resulting actions of each narrator after his interaction is completed.

In this following sections, I will look closely at Bigger's murder of Mary and his resulting character changes, as well as the Narrator's illicit scene with Sybil in order to exemplify each narrator's ability to recognize the presence of the unnamings and naming process. I propose that it is through the intimate nature of the unnamings and naming process that each narrator is able to foresee the possibility of his own re-naming. It is through Mary and Sybil that Bigger and the Narrator are attempting to experience the white world and seek a way to dismantle the white man's hold on their identity. To further this claim, Fanon's focus on the relationship between the man of color and the white woman will be analyzed as beginning with the colored man's idealized conception of attaining a white woman's love, and that he believes that "by loving me, she proves to me that I am worthy of a white love" to the inevitable psychological assertion of power that "I am a white man" (45). This assertion of Fanon's identifies the potential goal of the white woman relationship for each narrator; he is unconsciously interacting with these women to attempt the removal of his unnamed and then named state. Wright and Ellison, however, do not believe this is the way to achieve social power as Mary and Sybil commit their own acts of unnamings and naming on the narrators, which is the cause that

leads each narrator to confront the totality of their unnamed state. What is important in this discussion is that each author believes that the white woman can serve as a beginning point in which the unnamings and naming process can be recognized, and Fanon's work gestures towards an understanding of each narrator's personal motives when interacting intimately with Mary and Sybil. Each woman serves to provide direct access to the racial stereotypes that infect the personal identity of each narrator, thus leading to an act of unnamings and namings that causes each narrator to search for re-naming. This assertion holds for the experiences of both Bigger and the Narrator, in that each man is given an opportunity to have an intimate interaction with a white woman, in the hopes of attaining a new conception of the society the white woman inhabits; however, in each novel the tragic end of each interaction falls on the white woman's unfamiliarity with black culture, generating a comment by Wright and Ellison regarding the racial relationship between black and white during the time of each novel.

According to Gwen Bergner, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* limits its evaluations of women to their sexual encounters with men, thus restricting the accessibility of his theory to be laid directly on to the woman. Bergner uses psychoanalysis to complicate this work of Fanon to explore the role that gender plays in his theory: she states that "racial and gender privilege are so intertwined that Fanon evokes castration to describe racial disempowerment," removing the idea of the phallus as a gender variant, given that "the colonial relation allocates social power according to skin color rather than penis possession" and situates the black man as equally lacking to a woman (79). Bergner complicates this claim by expanding the relationship between a man of color and a white woman, stating that "black men are castrated in terms of social power but are imagined as

overendowed in terms of sexual anatomy. White women and black men disturb the white male imago on the level of sexual anatomy, but not in the same way” (87). This statement complicates Fanon’s work in order to leave room for a literary interpretation. This theory brings insight into the connection that Mary and Sybil feel to each narrator, and the narratological decision for Wright and Ellison to use a white woman to begin highlighting the narrator’s own unnamed status which is directly complicated within the interactions with each woman. Because the white woman and the black man both “disrupt the white male imago,” it is only through these interactions that the narrator can begin to see himself within the white world, a process that makes his unnamed state defined. When each woman shows that she needs to stereotype the narrator’s identity in order to interact with him, she is proving to each that he is unable to inhabit the power of individualized identity allotted to white men without her gaze. Within this action and definition given to his identity, the narrator is led to anger which allows him to foresee a need to identify his own relationship to that community.

Fanon, not unlike Wright and Ellison, is more interested in analyzing the impact that a white woman can have on a man of color, than discovering how the white woman’s own psychopathology and misunderstanding of the man of color can equally dominate a given interaction. I argue that Mary and Sybil are equally inhabiting the cultural stereotype of a naïve female character, whose inability to see beyond her own circumstances ultimately leads to the tragic end of her story. Bergner states of the black man and the white woman, that “although they may emanate from a common construction of otherness in psychoanalytic discourses, racial difference and sexual difference intersect and interact in contextually variable ways that preclude separate or determinist description” (77). My

readings of each scene between the narrator and the white woman are conducted in this way to explain that the white woman's misunderstanding of the cultural invisibility of the narrator causes the narrator anxiety, which in turn leads to either murder (Bigger) or a misuse of the female body (the Narrator).

By utilizing the construction of an interracial coupling, Wright and Ellison are playing on the conception of black masculinity as binary to the femininity of the white female. The black man and the white women are each ostracized from the power dynamic of the white man; however, the white woman is still afforded more power within that construct, making her the ideal vessel for the narrator to attempt to harness the power of naming afforded to white men. In this way, Mary and Sybil are given more power within the novel than each narrator, as they are the conduit for each narrator's ability to begin defining his own self-possession. Unfortunately for each woman, when she does not fully provide the necessary circumstances for the narrator to fully realize a re-named state, that power is stripped and re-asserted to the male character through a respective illicit act. Her place within each narrative must then be understood as only the means to which each narrator has a directly intimate un-naming and naming process, which ultimately allows the narrator the anger needed to initiate his re-naming.



## CHAPTER IV

### BIGGER AND MARY

In *Native Son*, Bigger's relationship to Mary and her contribution towards the unnamings and then naming of his social identity occurs in two steps: the first is during a movie newsreel, and the second during his interview with her father. During Bigger's time in the movie theatre he is able to gaze upon Mary uninterrupted, obtaining a purely personal perception of her through the movie screen; it is during this time that Bigger is made starkly aware of the cultural differences that separate him from Mary and the rest of the Dalton family. As he is not interacting directly with Mary at this time, this scene represents a very subjective unnamings for Bigger. The movie screen is projecting one perspective of white society which Mary is representing, and Bigger alone is interpreting its perception and appropriating those specifications onto his own awareness of self. It is then that his first personal interaction with Mary is made more intimate when seeing her within the Dalton home, as he has already constructed his own ideals about her identity as shaping his own; when she threatens to undo those projections, she is heightening her own attempts at unnamings and then naming Bigger.

In the movie theater, Bigger begins his unnamng process as associated with Mary before meeting her in person; by comparing his personal circumstances to the way she is seen on the screen, Bigger is identifying himself as a social Other within her presence in white society. In the scene in which Bigger is first made aware of Mary's existence, he and Jack have just finished "polishing [their] nightsticks" in the theatre in a scene that connects an obscene aspect of sexuality to the unwillingness of these boys to adhere to social decorum (Wright 30). At this point in the novel Bigger has not yet started working for the Dalton family, yet is anticipating the financial benefits that will come from being employed by a white man. It is then that Bigger sees Mary's image on the screen in a newsreel before the start of the movie. From the beginning of his perception of Mary, she appears larger than life and not entirely real. On the screen she is announced as a girl who "shocked society by spurning the boys" of her high society neighborhood, and accepted the "attentions of a well-known radical while on her recent winter vacation to Florida" (Wright 32). Through this commentary Bigger is forced to admit that the only way he or his friend could be in Florida is by "hanging from a tree like a bunch of bananas" and that he is unfamiliar with the definition of communism (Wright 32). Already, Bigger views Mary as beyond his social status, living in a world that holds many mysteries in which he is not a part. By stating that Bigger believes he and his friend Jack could only be in Florida by "hanging from a tree," Wright conjures images of lynching and also an association to an ape or monkey. Both suggestions work to explain Bigger's understanding of this girl on the screen as connected to his own stereotypical designation within her society. Mary now works in the novel as a means to which Bigger is unnamng and naming himself by self-employing racial stereotypes generated

by her white society, causing him to inhabit an identity that does not exist beyond that specifically constructed white gaze. This connection and recognition is essential to the initiating of the re-naming process that will begin after Bigger has fully interacted with Mary.

When Bigger and Mary interact directly, her various attempts to treat him as if they are socially equal causes Bigger anxiety as everything he understands about the differences between black and white society have told him that this equality is not possible. During his interview with Mr. Dalton, Mary attempts to inhabit that space designated to his side of the social veil and disrupts the perception he has built of her on the screen when she asks him directly, “Bigger, do you belong to a union?” (Wright 52). The question is answered by her father’s anger and Bigger reflecting, “He hated her then” (Wright 52). Mary’s brazen disruption of what Bigger perceives as the social order that defines his situation begins his descent into anger, resenting that she is attempting to inhabit his side of the social veil by asking him about his personal aspirations. Where the screen helped define his understanding of their different perspectives, Mary in person is threatening to undo the identity that he is trying to inhabit in order to obtain employment from her father. Bigger reflects on this difference in perception, thinking that “on the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it liked. But here in her home she walked over everything, put herself in the way” (Wright 55). Bigger now views Mary as a barrier that is goading him to cross into her social order and he begins to resent her presence and views her as a risk to his future: “*Goddamn that woman! She spoiled everything!*” is one of many lamentations that run through his mind when envisioning Dalton not hiring him due to Mary disrupting their interview. Mary is

distorting the view Bigger had of her on the screen; she is attempting to address him as an equal, yet the idea is foreign to him and facilitates anxiety that Bigger asserts to his inevitable economic demise. This misunderstanding of intentions is the first act that begins to define Bigger's intimate interaction with Mary. She is attempting to make Bigger feel heard, but is ignoring the fact that he is in an uncomfortable situation. Mary is therefore perpetuating his already commenced state of being unnamed and then named by projecting her desire to feel as if they are equals onto him, while ignoring his own comfort and continuing his feeling of social invisibility.

Bigger's feeling of resentment towards this misunderstanding of equality is heightened when he meets Mary's communist boyfriend Jan. When describing the scene in which Bigger is first introduced to Jan, Marc Black interprets the scene and the way that Jan aims to break through what he perceives as a simple conversation barrier, as "the invisibility of double consciousness" (395). Black explains that "Bigger has to try and understand how Jan and Mary see him, but Jan and Mary do not even have to know that they have no clue about Bigger's perspective, attitude, or feelings" (395). Jan and Mary are too forceful in trying to change Bigger's relationship to the white community, not realizing that the actions are alien to him as everything he has experienced about his place in white society has shown him that this equality is not possible. When Jan insists that Bigger not address him a "sir," but instead states, "I'll call you Bigger and you'll call me Jan. That's the way it'll be between us," Bigger cannot help but respond to this gesture with suspicion, and reflects that "he was very conscious of his black skin and there was a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of his black skin" (Wright 66). Bigger had never encountered this level of

frankness from a white man before, and it is Jan and Mary's insistence that "it's okay" that causes Bigger to feel belittled and "flushed with anger" (Wright 65). What is happening in this scene is that Jan and Mary are showing Bigger that they do not want or need to understand his feelings regarding this equality: they believe that by simply saying "it's okay," they can undo centuries of racial oppression that proves this equality does not exist. Bigger believes that everything that exists in his world prevents him from being able to interact with Jan and Mary in this equal state, and he is angry that they are forcing him to confront his inability to react in the way that they are requesting. This anger is reminiscent of the forced acknowledgement that he is operating outside of what Jan and Mary are insisting is the social norm. The fundamental misunderstanding between Bigger and these two white people, is that Jan and Mary believe they are "helping" Bigger and he is consciously aware that he did not ask for that assistance. Jan and Mary do not realize that they are neglecting to truly see that Bigger is uncomfortable by their actions, and by ignoring that fact they are neglecting to acknowledge that part of Bigger's self-perceived identity, causing him to feel invisible within their white gaze.

According to Black, Bigger's anger toward Jan and Mary grew from their inability to respect his view of their relationship towards one another, and was heightened because Bigger felt "entirely overwhelmed and stymied by his double consciousness" (395). Bigger ultimately begrudges the fact that Jan and Mary were causing him to be further aware of his Otherness, and resented their callous nature in ignoring his position. By denying to understand his side, and recognize that they may be threatening his job and future, Jan and Mary are disrespecting Bigger by refusing acknowledge the importance of his position within Mary's family as a source of income for himself and his family, and

causing his invisibility to them to be made clear. During this interaction, Bigger narrates that he “felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate” (Wright 67). Through this distressingly Du Boisian inner monologue, Wright is defining the anger that can come from being directly confronted with a personal un-naming and naming process as conducted by white society. Mary’s direct recognition of his discomfort by saying “It’s okay Bigger, Jan *means* it,” then blatantly denying to adhere to his wishes, puts her desire before his own, thus effectively beginning his sense of being unnamed and then named for her pleasure (Wright 66).

Bigger’s resentment of Jan and Mary dismissing his discomfort with their actions inevitably leads to the accidental murder of Mary, which occurred because Bigger was afraid of being caught and named as a rapist for simply being in Mary’s bedroom. Mary was too intoxicated to make it to her room after the outing with Jan, leaving Bigger to feel obligated to help her. Once there, he knew that if he were caught in Mary’s room “his job would be over,” and the white community would assume that he had raped Mary regardless of his actions (Wright 82). In this way, the murder is an act of self-preservation as he is ultimately aware that if Mrs. Dalton were to discover his presence, the repercussions could prove fatal or most likely end in the termination of his employment. Bigger behaves on instinct, and when Mrs. Dalton enters Mary’s room he is “intimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating toward him,” so he held a pillow over Mary’s face to keep her from giving his location away to her blind mother (Wright 86). He acted out of fear and survival, directly inserting himself into the white

society that dominated that fear. Before Mrs. Dalton enters, Bigger had been attempting to take sexual advantage of Mary as she dozed in and out of consciousness; this act added to his vulnerability while being inside of the Dalton home which made him shudder “with the intensity of his loathing for this house and all it had made him feel since he had first come into it,” making his instinct to act to save himself all the more relevant (Wright 87). By murdering Mary, Bigger has removed a threat to his economic progression and quieted the aggressive presence she brought to his own awareness of his double consciousness and state as Other. Through talking with Mary, his un-naming and then naming became defined; now that she has been murdered, he has taken a step towards re-defining that identity by asserting himself into the realm of white society. Through his vulnerability with Mary, his anger was finally able to manifest itself into an action that will later give him the courage to change his relationship to both the white and black community; it is at this time that he will be able to move towards the re-naming process.

Bigger’s re-naming process is instigated when he finally gives into the fear that has kept him feeling as the Other to white society; by murdering Mary, he became disillusioned with the control white society had over his identity. The morning after the murder, Bigger muses that he now recognized that “the thing to do was to act just like others acted, live liked they lived, and while they were not looking, do what you wanted. They would never know” (Wright 106). In 1974, scholar of African American literature Lola Jones Amis conducted a close reading of *Native Son*, in an attempt to navigate Bigger’s journey to self-discovery. While focusing on the psychological after effects of murdering Mary, Amis observes that since Bigger was “born black and therefore subservient and unwanted in a white world of hostility, hatred, and suspicion,” his main

concern is to seek something that will provide him “self-acceptance and status” (241). According to Amis, “Bigger begins this step toward self-realization and thus self-annihilation by accepting the death of Mary as an act of His Own Will rather than an act of Accident” (241). While her reading brings deeper context to this complicated novel, and does gesture towards the psychological and cultural influences towards Bigger’s narrative, Amis misses a point of connection and development within Bigger’s characterization. Amis mentions that “Bigger’s true image has become lost in an image of evil” after the murder, when it is arguably clearer that Bigger is not so much lost in an “evil image,” as he is finally allowing himself to see past the socially constructed unnamings and naming process (242). During this time, Bigger is struggling to form an entirely new identity in which he is capable of existing apart from white society’s projected appropriation of his identity. For the first time, Bigger is able to see himself as a direct part of the white society that had created the deep fear which led to murder. By murdering Mary, Bigger directly entered the realm of white society, and took part in the history of a prominent white family. Though the interaction is violent, Wright does not forget the heinous nature of this action; after all, Bigger is sentenced to death by the end of the novel; however, by using fear as Bigger’s reason for murder, Wright is expressing the inevitable violence that can come when an oppressed community is forced to interact with those who oppress.

Many critics examine *Native Son* as representative of the collective black psyche, however, the presence of the unnamings and naming process more appropriately defines this novel as presenting an individual’s attempt to construct his own sense of self away from the white gaze, not as representative of the identity of a whole community. Moving



beyond this literary scholarship that suggests that Bigger is the personification of the African American psyche, Gregory Phipps posits that instead, “Bigger’s development occurs primarily in relation to white subjectivity” and his struggle is therefore defined by “his surge toward greater freedom and self-consciousness [which] revolves around his struggle to construct, on his own terms, a kinetic opposition between his identity and the white American imagination” (325). What this perspective affords to my own version of the unnamings and namings process, is that it is the direct need for this re-naming and re-claiming of personal identity that defines Bigger’s interactions with Mary, and shapes his revelations after the fact. Fear leads to Mary’s murder, yet it is through Mary that he learns that he can take control of his own naming process, and moves beyond the constrictions of the unnamings and namings conducted by white appropriation. What Amis and Phipps collectively do is eloquently compose a motion towards a deeper reading to Bigger’s violent actions. Their readings introduce the interpretation that the murder of Mary is the catalyst that starts Bigger’s transformation from fearful and unnamed Bigger, to an individual who is aware of his own social invisibility and capable of reforming his own relationship to that world. The murder is then read as the result of forcing both sides of Bigger’s double consciousness to exist in the same space. Mary and Bigger were strangers to each other; when Mary attempted to act as if they were not, resentment and fear dominated the situation leading to Bigger’s belief that he needed to kill in order to survive within the white world.

After the murder, Bigger begins to recognize both aspects of his identity— the sense of self that he has constructed and that which has been projected onto him by white appropriation— allowing Bigger to begin asserting himself into the world, thus gaining a

stronger sense of his ability to define his own identity. One aspect of the novel that both Amis and Phipps neglect to interpret is the essence of the “blindness” Bigger associates to his family and friends once he has fully confronted the process of unnamings and namings conducted during his time with Mary. After he murders Mary, Bigger begins to understand his own place within white society, or at least how he views himself within its confines. He is able to directly recognize that it was out of fear that he murdered Mary; more importantly, after he has committed the crime he begins to feel as if he is a part of the white world, and begins to view his family and friends as “blind” because they have not shared in his experience. The morning after the murder, Bigger reflects that he no longer has to “hide behind a wall or curtain now; he had a safer way of being safe, an easier way. What he had done last night had proved that. Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton was blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind; yes, blind in more ways than one” (Wright 107). Bigger then laughs at the thought that Mrs. Dalton had not known he was there, and that because he was black his being there “would never have figured into her thoughts on such an occasion” and for that reason she was blind in more ways than one (Wright 107). Jan and the Daltons were all blind to Bigger himself, unable to comprehend that he would be capable of interacting in Mary’s life; this is a recognition of his unnamed and then named state as directly conducted by Jan and the Daltons, and Bigger is beginning to associate himself independently from the white gaze.

Bigger’s feeling as socially invisible began to dissipate, and he began to “see clearly” in a way that begins his final journey towards accepting, and effectively denying, the unnamings and namings confines of white society that threatened to keep him from a self-identified status. In the beginning of the novel Bigger is full of fear and angst, always

ready to pounce; he constantly feels the effects of white society's appropriation of his own identity, as is signified by his fear of being "invisible." Bigger reflects that once he had killed Mary, he "felt a lessening of tension in his muscles; he had shed an invisible burden he had long carried" indicating that this act of murder was liberating (Wright 114). Once he murdered Mary he is able to stop, think, and reflect on his actions in a clear way. It is apparent that the reason for this lessened fear is that the murder of Mary allowed him to participate in the white world; he murdered a white girl, and is therefore connected to the lives of the Dalton family and has taken part in their historical context. Once Bigger has accepted this perception of the situation, he is able to think his way through his feelings regarding the white community; he had never known how to act because he felt they saw him as less than human. Killing Mary proved that he was occupying the same space as white society; therefore, his abject feeling as the Other began to subside as his destiny was now directly intertwined with the Dalton family.

This newly acquired feeling of equality, however, did not last long, nor did it provide Bigger with a feeling of complete relaxation within his circumstances. Though he feels he had become a direct part of the white community by murdering Mary, his habitual uneasiness within white society resurfaces, stunting his progression towards undoing his societal unnamings and namings. The day after the murder, Bigger returns to the Dalton's in an attempt to secure a plan to frame Jan for the murder. Upon reentering the kitchen, he reflects on the natural fear and uneasiness he feels simply by being in the home of a white family:

He rested his black fingers on the edge of the white table and a silent laugh burst from his parted lips as he saw himself for a split second in a lurid objective light; he had killed a rich white girl and had burned her body after cutting her head off

and had lied to throw the blame on someone else and had written a kidnap note demanding ten thousand dollars and yet he stood here afraid to touch food on the table, food which undoubtedly was his own (Wright 186).

The illogicality of this fear is made manifest by Wright continuing Bigger's inner monologue highlighting the absurdity. Being allowed insight into Bigger's thought process allows Wright to grant his readers access into the mind of this black man: he may have murdered their daughter, chopped off her head, and burned her body in the very furnace that keeps the family home warm, but he is still hesitant to eat the white family's food. The irrationality of his fear is symptomatic of the anxiety black Americans live through due to the veil of double consciousness that has been constructed from a history of cultural oppression. The un-naming and naming process indicates how Bigger must operate within his own conception of self that has been placed upon him by white society; similarly, the Du Boisian veil of double consciousness is represented in Bigger's fear of touching the food, and indicates that the re-naming process has still not been achieved as Bigger recedes back to his initial feeling of fear when in the Dalton home. What is important is his ability to recognize and define the absurdity of his fear to touch the food of this white family.

Shortly after this scene, the issue of identity and re-naming is further explored, and this new ability to assert himself within the white world is made the clearest when Bigger is forced to speak with a few white reporters who are following Mary's "disappearance." Earle Vincent Bryant pays this scene due attention in his article "Richard Wright's Nameless *Native Son*," where he claims that it is during Bigger's interaction with the reporters that the reader first witnesses Bigger directly address white society's attempt to unname and then name him. One of Bigger's fears is being invisible to the white world,

so when a reporter fails to use his name and instead refers to him as “Mike,” Bryant observes that the reporter is essentially “vaporizing” him; given that “Bigger’s name is a reflection of and signpost to his identity,” when that name is disregarded, “so too is his identity” (265). Though the reader is able to glean Bigger’s anger from his inner-monologue, to the world of the novel he remains mostly silent, only saying “yessuh” and “naw” when appropriate. When Bigger finally speaks up, and claims “My name ain’t Mike,” the reader begins to see a shift in Bigger’s behavior as he recognizes the journalist’s attempt to delegitimize his existence (Wright 208). By interacting with this reporter and directly addressing the move to unname and then name him in the face of the media, Bigger is taking a step towards rejecting that misnamed designation. Of this scene, Bryant states that

Bigger, it must be remembered, is talking to a white man in a tone that is clearly out of place in the world of the novel. What this momentary flare of hostility reveals is that Bigger values his name, something that the reporter- and by extension, white society- does not do (264).

The reporter is exemplifying the various ways that white society has kept the African American as societal Other by refusing them a name, and subverting them to a social order that is lower than members who are afforded a true name and the ability to name. Bigger knows that it is his actions in murdering Mary that have brought these men to the house, and he therefore feels a sense of special power in knowing he has committed a crime in which the reporters do not think he could be associated. After the murder, Bigger reflects that “the knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but had now evened the score” (Wright 164). His willingness to

stand up to the reporter is proof that this reflection is constituting his ability to recognize the way that white society can unname and then name him in order to keep him situated as Other to their white society. It is within this recognition and then rejection of the reporter's unnamings and naming process that he begins his own re-naming.

After Bigger begins to assert his own re-naming, he is inevitably arrested and put on trial; as was discussed earlier, this is where the reader is first alerted to his true state of being left nameless directly by Wright. At the end of Bigger's trial, he is sentenced to death. Though this verdict is not necessarily surprising, the fact that the judge reverts back to using Bigger's nickname while delivering the verdict is a shock given the length the prosecution and judge went to declare that he should be referred to by his "legal name." When giving the verdict, the judge proclaims that "In Number 666-983, indictment for murder, the sentence of the Court is that you, Bigger Thomas, shall die on or before midnight of Friday, March third, in a manner prescribed by the laws of this state" (Wright 417). In this moment of damnation, the judge is still referring to Bigger by his nickname, even after stating that the court will only use his "legal name." This may be a strategic move on Wright's part to keep the reader unaware of his name, however, it is also inclusive of the motif of "vaporization" that Bryant used to define the fear Bigger felt from the white world. By the judge reverting back to calling him "Bigger," he is perpetuating the unnamings and naming process in order to directly separate Bigger from the white world that has now condemned him to death. This does not, however, dampen the progress that Bigger has felt since the murder; as will be unpacked later, the following weeks in his prison cell will lead to a clarity that allows Bigger to continue his own re-naming process in terms of his own identity, and the way he relates to the white world.

## CHAPTER V

### THE NARRATOR AND SYBIL

The same stark awareness of the unnamings and namings process is felt by Ellison's Narrator after his illicit interaction with Sybil, the white wife of a Brotherhood member. At this time in *Invisible Man*, the Narrator is working with the Brotherhood, a fictional stand in for the communist party. The Brotherhood misrepresents their purpose to the Narrator as aiming for "racial harmony," as the Narrator later discovers they were merely using him and his talent for purveying rallying speeches in order to create chaos in Harlem. It is during this time when he begins to suspect the Brotherhood of being disingenuous, that he meets Sybil and attempts to use her to gain information on the Brotherhood to discover their true intentions. What he finds with Sybil, however, is something more profound and personal as he is brought into direct contact with an intimate unnamings and namings that threatens to disrupt his perceived relationship to both white and black society.

Before his interaction with Sybil, the Narrator comes in contact with several Harlem neighbors who mistake him for “Rinehart,” an action that leads to the beginning of the Narrator’s full recognition of being socially invisible to both the black and white communities. Rinehart is a seemingly absent character, described as a presumable dealer and pimp who has a reputation around the Narrator’s Harlem neighborhood as being “the man” who can be anything to anyone. After being mistaken for Rinehart several times, the Narrator decides to take on this false identity; it is this action of acquiring a false name that provides the Narrator with early insight into the ramifications of being truly, socially invisible. According to Joseph Trimmer, “Rinehart possesses multiple identities because he yeses everybody’s misconceptions of him. In this way Rinehart demonstrates the doctrine of possibility” (48-9). By the Narrator acting to “try on” this persona, he begins to realize that his own view of identity is separate from that projected onto him by both societies. His ability to be mistaken for Rinehart etches towards an un-naming and naming process, yet his readiness to try and “be Rinehart” indicates his willingness to understand outside perceptions of who he is seen to be. Kimberly Benston takes the assertions of Trimmer a step further, stating that “beyond culture, ‘Rinehart’ is, ultimately, a mode of being and, most specifically, a violence to the restrictive epistemology of cultural nomenclature” (7). When the Narrator practices existing as Rinehart, he begins the process of acknowledging his own unnamed status through the incorporation of a false name presented to him by his own black community. The Rinehart name, however, does not offer a way to instigate his own re-naming, as he inevitably rejects that identity by acknowledging that it is a mere projection of the desire of others. It is this experience as Rinehart that leads to his belief that he can use Sybil



when he decides to take down the Brotherhood. As Benston states, Rinehart presents a “mode of being” that has ultimately emboldened the Narrator into taking the steps towards being intimately involved with Sybil. By assuming a named identity, the Narrator begins interacting with the world apart from what he believes is appropriate; by acting as Rinehart, the Narrator is trying on a name and identity that allows him to interact with his community in a way he had never before attempted. However, the Narrator soon finds that the Rinehart persona is not compatible with his preferred mode of interaction. During his time with Sybil, the Narrator realizes the falsity of the Rinehart persona, leading to a more vulnerable unnamings and namings process as he must acknowledge that the Rinehart experiment was a failure, and he is again unable to claim an identity. This failure occurring while simultaneously interacting with Sybil, who is conducting her own unnamings and namings process of the Narrator, creates a scene intimate enough to cause the Narrator to take his first step towards truly re-claiming his identity.

Sybil is the conduit who enhances the Narrator’s failure in constructing his own identity when she attempts to supply a stereotypical identity onto him; at this time, the Narrator has experienced the unnamings and namings process by both the black and white communities. Sybil is presented in the novel as the naïve white woman who mistakes the Narrator as representing every man of color. During their rendezvous, the Narrator relates that he was expected to do “fancy tricks” and was left to navigate Sybil’s insistence on casting him in “fantasies” in which he was “Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-were-possible” (Ellison 517). Sybil then enlists the Narrator to perform in her rape fantasy, an act that is identified by him as “a very revolting ritual” to which she

claimed “it’ll be easy for you,” putting emphasis on her own misunderstanding of the Narrator and the African American male community. By subjecting the Narrator to this fantasy, believing that because of his black skin rape is a common act, “Sybil naively reminds the narrator that he is not symbolically positioned simply as a man but as a black man” during their encounter (Steward 528). It is at this time that the Narrator recognizes the symbolic nature of Sybil and their exchange: Sybil is working to unname and then name the Narrator by projecting onto him the racial stereotype of a “black bruiser” in order to fulfill her rape fantasy, assuming that he would be willing to partake in the action simply because of his black skin. In this scene, Sybil provides the Narrator with a very intimate version of the unnamings and namings process that he will later cause the Narrator to recognize the importance of re-claiming his identity.

As the Narrator attempts to woo Sybil into revealing secrets about the Brotherhood, the Narrator is brought to his moment of pure crisis where the possibility of re-naming is first presented and directly acknowledged. While most critical discussions of *Invisible Man* mention this scene between Sybil and the Narrator, many neglect to indicate that this scene presents the first indication that a self-proclaimed identity is possible for the Narrator. When critics such as Trimmer merely mention Sybil, yet do not analyze the moment of self-proclamation the Narrator experiences with her, they are overlooking an opportunity to investigate the Narrator’s first attempt at personal re-naming. For these critics, their arguments would do well to highlight the psychoanalytical reading of this scene that Douglas Steward conducted in his article “The Illusions of Phallic Agency: *Invisible Man*, *Totem and Taboo*, and the Santa Claus Surprise.” In the middle of their drunken sexual-esque encounter, the Narrator uses Sybil’s lipstick to write

SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED

BY

SANTA CLAUS

SURPRISE

across her stomach (Ellison 522). Steward re-creates this scene, yet simply states that this moment “seems to have stumped most commentators, who (if they refer to it at all) tend merely to cite the strange graffito without offering interpretation” (529). Steward provides this scene the direct analysis it deserves, however, he misses the first moment of true re-naming. Steward affords the Narrator’s night with Sybil the nickname of “The Santa Claus Surprise,” yet I argue that with that name Steward is focusing on the Narrator’s act in and around the transcription, rather than the direct action he takes with Sybil. To analyze this interaction properly, I propose a re-naming of the scene as the “Lipstick Inscription,” as that will put the due emphasis on the act of composing a signature, rather than the element of “surprise” in which Steward is focusing. The Lipstick Inscription, then, refers to the act of signing the graffito with the name “Santa Claus,” as well as the act of textual rape being implied within the message itself. Where Steward reads this scene as representing the Narrator’s alignment with Sybil as being mere “puppets of a castrating and tricky cultural network” in which they “mistakenly see in each other the flickering sign of their own promised fulfillment,” I interpret the scene as the Narrator’s first act of identification, in which he has psychically interacted with Sybil by using her body to transcribe the first identity that Ellison has allotted to his narrator (531). By having the Narrator actually sign Sybil’s body with the name “Santa Claus,” Ellison has allowed his Narrator to assign a name to himself. Penning a signature is an act in which an individual takes ownership of a name as representing the self, as

well as the self the individual wishes to present to his or her surrounding society. The assigning of a name is then a designation of where the individual views him or herself as existing, even within the realm of double consciousness. This is an act that Ellison has not previously, nor does after the Lipstick Inscription, given to his nameless narrator.

Using Steward's own argument, the scene with Sybil is read as the Narrator's most vulnerable unnamings and naming process, in a way that makes the process of re-naming a possibility. Interpreting this act as the Narrator attempting to stake a claim on his own identity by signing his name as "Santa Claus," puts the Narrator's choice of Sybil into perspective: Sybil is loose, easy, and controllable, every trait the Narrator continues to fight off within himself. Yet when she asks him to engage in a racially stereotypical rape-fantasy, she causes his blackness to become identified, effectively conducting her own unnamings and naming of the Narrator's identity. The need for him to assert an identity apart from her forced appropriation, is a moment of crisis in which he has to decide whether he is willing to fulfill Sybil's fantasy; he denies her, and instead undoes her attempt to unname and then name him for her own purposes, by beginning his own course of self-possession.

The choosing of the name "Santa Claus" allows insight into the Narrator's unconsciousness, as the name can be read as representing memories from his associations to both the black and white communities. The name "Santa Claus" calls upon the Narrator's early encounter with Mr. Norton, the white founder of the college he briefly attended. Upon first meeting Norton, the Narrator described him as having "a face pink like St. Nicolas', topped with a shock of silk white hair" (Ellison 37). By linking this Lipstick Inscription back to a dominant white man within his past, the Narrator is playing

with white identity. The choosing of the name “Santa Claus” is simultaneously calling on the memory of Mr. Norton, incorporating the smell of the “Christmas Night” perfumed woman whom mistook the Narrator for the never present Rinehart, and also calling on the “St. Nicholas Street” the Narrator identifies as part of his Harlem neighborhood. These combined references are working within the Narrator’s unconsciousness to form an identity that combines both the white and black communities, which he now recognizes as working to appropriate him for their own needs. By each of these associations linking to the real St. Nicholas name, and the Narrator choosing to identify as “Santa Claus,” the fictionalize version of this real man, the Narrator is designating himself as outside of each community, proving the reader a glimpse into his future decision to fully embrace his social invisibility.

While Rinehart began this journey, the Narrator could only pretend to be this man when strangers instigated the mistake; by consciously choosing to write a note to Sybil and her husband (“Just wait until George sees that”), that the man who committed the sexual act was “Santa Claus,” he is situating himself into the realm of culturally-appropriated identity, by way of Santa’s mythological existence (523). Ellison has his Narrator insinuate that Sybil was raped, an act which she pleaded with him to complete; when the Narrator signs this textual rape with the name “Santa Claus,” instead of performing the sexual act, he has decided to act the way he wanted to act, and not through the desires of white society. By Ellison having the Narrator sign his name as “Santa Claus,” Ellison is utilizing literary unnamings to comment on the way the Narrator views himself and his own double consciousness. Santa Claus is the socially-constructed entity whose fictional creation evolved from a real man; by the Narrator taking on this

name, he is recognizing the fact that he is no more of a true person to white or black society than the fictional Santa Claus. He has then fully acknowledged the various ways that white and black society has unnamed and named him for their own purposes.

What is missing from the scholarship surrounding the Lipstick Inscription is an analysis of the naming power that is associated with the Narrator's decision to wipe that "Santa Claus" signature away. It is within this scene with Sybil that the Narrator has made his first step towards the re-naming process; by identifying himself as "Santa Claus" he is accepting that part of his identity that has been constructed through white perception, then rejects that forced identity when he wipes the Inscription away claiming that "such games were for Rinehart, not me" (Ellison 523). In this way, the Narrator is deconstructing the unnamings and namings performed on him by others when he wipes away the scrawl, metaphorically erasing his last attachment to the social world that has aimed to provide him with a false identity. Where Rinehart was too risky and cynical, the Santa Claus rapist nomenclature was misrepresentative of his own abilities; he states that Sybil had "picked a boy for a man's job," referring to the sexual role play she had been encouraging him to enact, even as she dozed in and out of consciousness (Ellison 523). Though this scene does not fully present a moment of true self-identification for the Narrator, Shelly Jarenski aptly points out that "the narrator's embrace of invisibility comes through his second sexual encounter with a white woman [Sybil]" thus leading to the preceding chapters in which the Narrator fully confronts the magnitude of his invisibility (95). Therefore, though he has not defined an identity, he has begun to move beyond the confines of his double consciousness, and is capable of

recognizing its restrictions on his own formation of self<sup>5</sup>. If “Santa Claus” is the identification of a once real Saint forced into the realm of the mythological by society, so too is the Narrator being forced into the realm of invisibility. By wiping away this identity constructed by his white and black counterparts, he begins to reject his being unnamed and then named by them, and is effectively continuing his journey towards the re-naming process.

The Narrator’s next step towards embracing his invisibility comes during his time within the Harlem riot, which causes him to grasp the true intentions of the Brotherhood. Now that the Narrator has begun to accept his social invisibility and has acknowledged his ability to remove himself from its confines, he takes to the streets of Harlem, presumably leaving Sybil in a cab after their failed sexual encounter. Unfortunately, as the Narrator staggers through the streets that are throttled with riotous citizens, he stumbles upon a gruesome scene in which it is ambiguously indicated that he has found Sybil dead, strung up in front of a store window in an analogous scene to a racial lynching<sup>6</sup>. Sybil has now abruptly left the narrative. The assumption is that she was murdered by the mob, and in essence left to die by the Narrator. Though the Lipstick Inscription, as well as the use of women to situate the Narrator within a state of self-

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<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Sylvander’s 1975 article “Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Female Stereotypes” is referenced in Steward and Jarenski’s respective articles, forming an interpretation of Ellison’s white female characters as being a point of abjection, situating the African American man as much of an “Other” to the dominant American society as a white woman. It is important to note that continuing scholarship into Ellison’s use of white women, particularly Sybil, has historically been wrapped in the analysis of identity.

<sup>6</sup> Though not speaking directly of this or the Lipstick Inscription, Robert E. Abrams defines the “dreamlike quality” of the novel, suggesting that Ellison wrote this way to “replace rigid caricatures of reality with a form of fiction registering experience in authentic fluidity and dissonance” (603). Abrams spends his article analyzing the novel’s various dream sequences; however, the same can be applied to the Narrator’s interpretation of the Harlem riot to indicate Ellison’s effort to provide conscious realism to the harsh reality of racial issues experienced by the Narrator. Interpreting the dummy hanging as Sybil’s murder, is then afforded a direct allegory to a racial lynching that Ellison is re-appropriating here to afford Sybil an equal place behind the social veil that is currently causing the Narrator stress as he makes his way through Harlem.

identified invisibility, has been analyzed by the critics aforementioned in this paper, each has failed to acknowledge the fact that the Narrator may have witnessed Sybil's dead body swinging in the chaotic haze of the Harlem riot. It is alarming that this scene has been glossed over given its racially subverted allegory to a lynching scene; it may be the very vagueness of the scene that has caused many critics to steer away, yet it deserves to be acknowledged. The scene is only given one line of true acknowledgement, so brief that it could be argued to be either fact or the hallucination of a man already wrought with guilt over his interaction with Sybil. Re-stated below is the sentence being questioned and the few lines preceding:

They were mannequins- "Dummies!" I said aloud. Hairless, bald and sterilely feminine. ... suddenly I was more devastated by the humor than by the horror. But are they unreal, I thought: Are they? What if one, even one is real- is... Sybil? I hugged my brief case, backing away, and ran... (Ellison 556).

Whether or not Ellison intended his reader to believe Sybil had been killed is not as important as the Narrator's response to the thought that she had been hanged. This scene happens merely hours after the Lipstick Inscription and the Narrator's descent into the realm of self-identity. It is after he is confronted with Sybil's possible murder that he begins to understand the situation in Harlem, and becomes aware of the Brotherhood's true intentions. The Narrator realizes then that he had been used as a pawn to bring Harlem to this point of chaos. The combined recognition of the Brotherhood using him to create chaos, to his intimate unnamings and namings by Sybil, is enough to force the Narrator to acknowledge his need to remove himself from this society to conduct the re-naming process. By doing so, he can escape the confines these projected identities have had on the creation of his own formation of self.



With this reading of Sybil as murdered, the Narrator's circumstances become connected to that of Bigger's as each has a failed sexual encounter with a white woman that ultimately leads to her death. Though the circumstances are devastatingly different, the connection highlights the danger that Fanon hints at when critiquing interracial relationships, and that it is not enough to fix the relationships between the races, because "it is through self-consciousness and renunciation, through a permanent tension of his freedom, that man can create the ideal conditions of existences for a human world" (206). Through these scenes, however, what Wright and Ellison are composing is a comment on the unconscious thought process that may cause a man of color to believe that it is through the feeling of "white love" that they can live like a white man. By having each situation end in tragedy, I argue that Wright and Ellison align themselves with Fanon, stating that it will take more than interacting intimately with a white woman to undo the unnamings and namings process that has been conducted to keep black society believing they are separate from white. There is power in identity, and it is only through the individual black American taking that identity back from white appropriation for him or herself, that the unnamings and namings process can truly be undone.

What is present in each of these works is that with the evolving of cultural awareness comes the acknowledgment of double consciousness. Wright and Ellison have presented narratives that highlight the dangers of these worlds colliding through the interactions of their narrator with a white woman; however, through the critique of the unnamings and namings processes, each story makes it clear that the colliding needs to continue, as each narrator has been brought closer to his own understanding of his unnamings and subsequent namings by the end of each narrative. It is by way of this recognition that the

narrators are able to accept their need to re-name themselves in order to gain self-possession. By the end of each novel the narrator has taken steps towards conducting their own re-naming; this ending result allows both Wright and Ellison to provide his reader with access to the psychological state of being unnamed and named by an outside society, as well as showcasing the importance that the re-naming process has on an individual's need to escape that social designation. This access is granted in order to progress the state of the African American community in the first half of the twentieth century. In order for an individual to move beyond a feeling of social invisibility, he or she must first recognize and define that socially unnamed state.

Once the unnamings and namings process has been defined and recognized by Bigger and the Narrator, his respective narrative begins to shift towards the process of re-naming. For each narrator, his time with a white woman has allowed him to recognize his state as unnamed and then named through the woman's own appropriation of his identity, while also providing access to what he perceives as the ability to harness the power of the white man. This concept is understood through the work of Fanon, who along with Wright and Ellison are stating that an interracial relationship is not the answer to cultural oppression. These relationships are, however, a mechanism with which to explain the cultural difference between the black and white communities. Within the course of each novel, the white woman is a medium by which the narrator can interact with the white world, while still being denied the power of being a white male. This denial is shown in each narrator's inability to hold on to the fleeting embrace of his own identity found while with the white woman. The scenes following each interaction indicate that though the white woman may have presented each narrator with an

opportunity to begin his own re-naming, the interaction with her is not enough to cause him to completely re-define his social state.

While murder was Bigger's conduit into the white world and his decision to obtain his own identity, Ellison's Narrator took a less violent, although equally promiscuous path to his recognition of the unnamings and naming process. Critical debate of *Invisible Man* focuses on the issue of identity, yet rarely cites his illicit scene with Sybil as a crucial moment of introspection in which the Narrator takes hold of his personal relationship to his current circumstances. The idea of invisibility in *Invisible Man* is one of great controversy; however, it seems evident that the critics who focus on a psychoanalytic view of the Narrator would agree with Ann Folwell Stanford's proposal that the "trope of invisibility functions as a critique of racist American society" within the novel<sup>7</sup>. Stanford's assertion can similarly be applied to Wright's *Native Son* once it is accepted that the application of a nickname over a legal name is its own version of narrative namelessness. Taking in that definition, as according to Stanford, it is the action of literary unnamings that provides each author a setting which allows them to construct a criticism of the perpetuation of the racial division defined by white society's continual enacting of the unnamings and naming process.

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<sup>7</sup> "He Speaks for Whom?: Inscription and Reinscription of Women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters*," by Sanford, is referenced by David Steward and Shelly Jarenski, both of whom are referenced in this paper to frame the psychoanalytic view point taken in the reading of the Santa Claus scene as implicit in the Narrator's dissolution into cultural invisibility.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSION:**

#### **TAKING BACK THE UNNAMING**

After interacting with Mary and Sybil, Bigger and the Narrator have now been confronted with the unnamings and namings process through the intimate application of a racial stereotype. Due to the intimate nature of the false appropriation of the narrator's self, Bigger and the Narrator are brought to a moment of crisis that allows each to obtain clarity regarding his own state of identity as perceived by himself and through the white gaze. After Bigger is put on trial for the murder of Mary, he begins to see his relationship to the white world and the white appropriation of his identity clearly, and begins to address his circumstance directly by changing the way he speaks to white men. For Ellison's Narrator, it is after his time with Sybil that the reader begins to understand the comments made in the prologue of the novel, in which he identifies himself as an "invisible man." It is after understanding the unconscious choice to signify himself as "Santa Claus" with Sybil, that the Narrator's decision to reject that socially-appropriated identity by choosing to identify himself as "invisible" is seen as an assertion of self-possessing power. For both Bigger and the Narrator, the end of each novel portrays the

narrators as having accepted their unnamed state; with this acceptance comes their ability to unname the white society that has forced the unnamings and namings process upon them during the course of each narrative.

It is during the time after his trial that Bigger is finally able to engage with the re-naming process, conducts the unnamings of white society, and achieves clarity as to why he murdered Mary. At the end of *Native Son*, Boris Max comes to apologize to Bigger for his inability to overturn the death penalty conviction. Instead of being distraught, Max finds a Bigger who is able to think clearly and rationally. Though Bigger's voice is described as being "full of frenzied anguish," he is shown as a character who understands himself, his actions, and more importantly the impact his surroundings have made on each (Wright 429). During his last conversation with Max, Bigger claims that "I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" and that he was able to understand and say these things because he knew that he was going to die (Wright 429). In this way, Bigger has made the connection between murder and the white world, and that this murder was his way of participating in the historical context of the society that has so often unnamed and named him, thereby creating his double consciousness. The white world has denied to see him apart from their own appropriation of his identity; yet, when he murdered Mary, the fear he felt right before the act made him recognize that he was living within the same world as Mary and her family. The recognition of fear, and his willingness to kill to protect himself, made him conscious of his own interaction with that other world. It is this recognition and understanding that allowed Bigger to feel at peace with his actions and accept that part of his identity that has been created by the unnamings and namings process.

Once Bigger accepts his fate and begins to understand why he felt the need to murder Mary, he takes the last step towards understanding and re-asserting his own identity by interacting directly with the white world, and adapting the way he addresses certain white men. After Bigger has revealed his new understanding of the world and his actions to Max, he makes a rhetorical move that indicates a tonal shift in his complete accepting of his circumstances. As Max is leaving Bigger's cell, Bigger yells out to Max,

“Mr. Max!”

Max paused, but did not look.

“Tell... Tell Mister... Tell Jan hello...” (Wright 430).

There are two things happening in this short, rather veiled exchange: first, Bigger is showing a total recognition of his impending death, and the fact that he has accepted his fate. In the exchange before this ending dialogue, Bigger is confident in a way that has not been shown previously in the novel. His ability to verbally address his feelings, and talk in more than clipped sentences to his white lawyer shows a shift in his verbal confidence. Now that he knows he is going to die, he is recognizing that he is alive, and alive in the same way that Mary Dalton is dead. The second profound rhetorical shift happens in this last line of dialogue, where Bigger is working through the proper way to address Mary's communist boyfriend, deciding whether he should call him Mr. Erlone or Jan. With his first attempt he wants to address Jan by his surname, representing the respect he felt he had to provide to a white man. Bigger, however, does not finish the statement: the ellipses that follow indicate that he is taking the time to think through what he wants Max to hear. He thinks, and instead of completing a formal greeting, removes the formality and chooses to address Jan by his first name. In doing so, Bigger is

stripping the ceremony of the greeting that causes Bigger to view Jan as his superior, and is aiming to un-name this formality that he associates to Jan because he is white. By going through this un-naming process, Bigger has begun to re-name his own identity by seeing himself as existing in the same social world as this white man; this transformation happened solely because Bigger acted out on his fear and murdered Mary.

While Bigger's narrative ends in his being sentenced to death, Ellison's Narrator is afforded a hopeful resurrection, while navigating his engagement with the issues associated with self-discovery after his encounter with Sybil that have led him to identify himself as an "invisible man." During the prologue to *Invisible Man*, the reader is introduced to man who has found acceptance within defining himself as "invisible" and is already at the end of his story. It is in the beginning that the reader learns that the Narrator has learned to love his invisibility after the actions that take place later in the novel; however, it is not clear until the end exactly what that means in terms of his self-made identity. According to the Narrator, "the end is in the beginning," which is certainly true as the prologue contains many clues that hint at the Narrator's progress within the re-naming process (Ellison 571). At the time of the prologue, the reader is led to believe that the Narrator has been underground for some time; by the end of the novel, the reader discovers that this decision came shortly after his time with Sybil and the chaos in Harlem. During this opening narrative, the narrator muses over his personal relationship and understanding of living invisibly, and defines it for his reader by stating that when you live as an invisible man, "You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tried with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you

begin to bump people back” (Ellison 4). The Narrator stating that he has begun to “bump people back” reads as a character shift given the Narrator’s hesitation towards interacting aggressively within the white world during the course of the narrative; within this early insight, the Narrator is understood as having found power within identifying himself as invisible. The elation and sincerity in which the Narrator defines himself as “an invisible man” provides the reader with a sense that he finds power in that identity. By accepting this invisible self, the Narrator has stripped away the confines of the unnamings and naming process that has been conducted upon him previously by both the black and white community. By opening the novel with “I am an Invisible man,” Ellison is allowing his narrator to make a clear statement of identity; invisibility is a form of self-definition without a name that has empowered the Narrator to decide to choose his own sense of self away from the white gaze.

In the epilogue to *Invisible Man*, Ellison writes that the Narrator is living underground in his self-described “hole,” and has begun to revel in the power associated with living as an “invisible man,” yet is still working to fully understand how to move beyond that state. The Narrator makes a last stab at attaching meaning to his tale by stating that he is speaking for the reader. Ellison himself is conscious of the fact that the Narrator runs the risk of becoming a pitied character due to his lack of self-defined name; to avoid this, he uses the epilogue and prologue to make this novel a personal appeal in order to deliver the Narrator’s story as a warning to not live for anyone other than oneself, as to do so is to give credence to the veil of double consciousness that still separates black and white society. In this same way, the interaction with Sybil is enough to begin his re-naming process, yet Ellison is careful to keep this interaction from being enough to undo the



cultural oppression visited upon his narrator due to the historical unaming process. The Narrator addresses the fact that he may have “overstayed [his] hibernation” so that Ellison can show that he will not live underground forever, but merely needs to live so in order to progress beyond his state of “hurt” invisibility (Ellison 581). The Narrator claims at the end of the epilogue, “I’m shaking off the old skin and I’ll leave it here in the hole. I’m coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nonetheless” confirming to his reader that he will encounter a new identity, but will remain aware that invisibility will always be a part of his sense of self (581). By deciding to find power in this invisibility, the Narrator has begun to take control of his own naming process and has stripped away the white world’s ability to situate him as invisible for their own purposes.

Through the utilization of literary unaming, Wright and Ellison are constructing a symbolic representation of the impact that the historical unaming and naming process conducted during slavery has had on the formation of black identity, by creating narrators who remain nameless. In each novel, Bigger and the Narrator attempt to see beyond the confines of the white-appropriated version of their individual identity by actively moving towards undoing the unaming and naming process conducted on them during their interactions with Mary and Sybil. This act emphasizes Wright and Ellison’s belief that black identity needs to develop beyond Du Bois’s double consciousness and away from the white gaze. Each narrator follows a different path towards the discovery of his own unnamed state in the face of white society; though the narratives go in two distinct directions, each is led back to an end in which the narrator finds power in his identity when he directly participates in his own unaming of white society by altering the way he interacts with the white world. By ending each novel in a similar state of continued

unnaming and then naming, with a hope towards re-naming, Wright and Ellison are stating that there is still more for the African American and white communities to learn about one another, and that it is not through the white world that the African American can truly gain power, acceptance, and self-possession. In order to do so, they need to conduct their own naming process, and see beyond the confines of white society; it is only through both the black and white communities acknowledging each side of the unnamings and naming process, that the dangerous circumstances of race relations in modern American can hope to advance.

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