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The Living Clue: Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953)

In the darkness his fear made live in him an element which he reckoned with as "them." He had to construct a case for "them." [...] Fingerprints! He had read about them in magazines. His fingerprints would give him away, surely! They could prove that he had been inside her room! But suppose he told them that he had come to get the trunk? That was it! The *trunk*! His fingerprints had a right to be here.

Native Son (1940) 88.

He looked swiftly around to make sure that he was leaving no marks of his having been in the room. He had to hurry . . . The door? Fingerprints on the knob . . .? No; he would not bother about them. After all, if he made things *too* clean, the police would get suspicious [...] His prints had a right to be on the door.

The Outsider (1953) 305.

Like many writers of postwar crime fiction, from Cornell Woolrich to Patricia Highsmith, Richard Wright concerned himself more with the experience of the criminal than with that of the detective. This distinction may seem unremarkable, but by orienting the familiar forms of the detective story toward the anxiety that attends *leaving* an identifying trail of evidence rather than the suspense—and relative safety—associated with *tracking* it, Wright's genre of choice takes on a special significance, one that is most evident in relation to the freighted political philosophies of his later novel *The Outsider* (1953).

Wright returned to the criminal's material trail throughout his career, and the particular kind of double consciousness its manipulation necessitates, most notably in *Native Son* (1940), *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1944), and *The Outsider* (1953). While cynically prescient about the latter novel's slim chances for success with American audiences, Wright nonetheless believed that in protagonist Cross Damon he had evoked a character in which "one can read the feeling, the movement, and rhythm of a man alive and confronting the world with

all his strength.”¹ Nonetheless, at the novel’s publication critics—and even a few friends—tended to assess *The Outsider* as either an embarrassment of philosophical excess, an expatriate’s disappointing avoidance of American race realities, or a weak recapitulation of the more successful *Native Son*.²

Though renewed critical interest in the novel has improved its reputation of late, most still view the novel as a deeply flawed work, aesthetically and politically; one recent critic has gone so far as to suggest that it reveals Wright’s own investment in a version of freedom that can only be promised by ideologies of fascism.³ Such assessments, however, tend to reduce a novel

¹ Quoted by Michel Fabre from Wright’s journal, 315. Fabre describes these first few years in Paris during the composition of *The Outsider*, commonly referred to among critics as Wright’s “existentialist period,” as a time of rich spiritual cultivation: “. . . each day further removing himself from purely American preoccupations by acquiring a more European, more global view of his situation in particular, of the black situation in general and of the situation of contemporary man. These years, which could be called a second maturation, or a reorientation, were, in fact, the somewhat confused beginnings of Wright’s new view, in the fifties, that the salvation of humanity would come only from the Third World. Although he continued to be interested in writing novels, they were still the result of his prior interests in psychoanalysis and ideology. Even *The Outsider* was a means of obliterating the past, not of announcing a future.” (316) Though *The Outsider* may not be “announcing a future,” I suggest that the novel reveals an author very much concerned with the future—particularly the implications, and potential dangers, of a progressive agenda predicated on notions of individualized liberties that might blunt the possibilities for collective action and community. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. Trans. Isabel Barzun. 2nd edition (Urbana: U of I P, 1993).

² Though the novel was well-received by Granville Hicks and L. D. Reddick, in his review of *The Outsider* in *Saturday Review* Arna Bontemps all but dismisses it as evidence of Wright’s “roll in the hay” with French existentialism, and further asserts that the protagonist’s problems have “nothing to do with color;” in her review in *Freedom*, Lorraine Hansberry, who was certainly under some obligation to defend the Communist Party against Wright’s scathing depiction, cuts straight to the quick: “*The Outsider* is a story of sheer violence, death, and disgusting spectacle, written by a man who has seemingly come to despise humanity [. . .] [With *The Outsider*, Wright] works energetically in behalf of our oppressors; he has lost his own dignity and destroyed his talent.” Critics such as Michel Fabre and Amritjit Singh have highlighted Wright’s philosophical influences in ways that do not reduce the novel to an ideological argument, but nonetheless rely more upon Wright’s intellectual biography for its analysis than the formal aspects of the story itself. See Robert J. Butler, ed. *The Critical Response to Richard Wright* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995) 103-29; 106, 109. For further examples of contemporary critical reception, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah, eds. *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993) 35-48, 369-408; Harold Bloom, ed. *Richard Wright: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987). Critics have tended to diminish *The Outsider*’s participation in the crime genre, choosing instead to focus on the philosophical arguments that tend to overshadow, and interrupt, the movement of the story. A few however have illuminated the significance of Dostoevsky’s influence, particularly the relationship between *Crime and Punishment* and *The Outsider*. See for example Maria R. Bloshtyen, “Rage and Revolt: Dostoevsky and Three African American Writers,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 38 no. 4 (2001) 277-309, and Michael F. Lynch, “Haunted by Innocence: The Debate with Dostoevsky in Wright’s ‘Other Novel’ *The Outsider*,” *African American Review*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 1996) 225-266.

³ See Mark Christian Thompson, *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture between the Wars* (Charlottesville: UVA Press, 2007) 143-70. Regarding the novel’s “failure,” A. Robert Lee’s assertion represents a certain consensus regarding Wright’s aesthetic weaknesses: “The failure of both books [*The Outsider* and Wright’s other attempt at the crime genre, *Savage Holiday*] lies in the fact that

which, in more than eight hundred pages of wrenching violence, moral paralysis, suffering, obsession, and finally ambivalent redemption, ultimately refuses to be ideologically pinned down. Indeed, the force of the novel lies precisely in its author's determination to evoke possibly irresolvable paradoxes embedded in the promises of both liberalism and liberation. This essay then brackets the question of the novel's aesthetic or political evaluation, and describes instead how it puts the crime genre to work illuminating complexities only partially approached by the novel's philosophical but nonetheless unreliable protagonist.

Despite its extensive—and extensively criticized—ideological preoccupations, *The Outsider* is at its core a drama of crime and detection. Addressing the novel as a crime story, however, has frequently led to some of its worst criticism. An early review in *Jet* magazine for example dismissed the novel as “a cheap drugstore whodunit” and its author consequently as “an outsider—an outcast from his own people.”⁴ Perhaps to distinguish themselves from such early devaluations, recent critical treatments have tended to ignore or dismiss the significance of the novel as a crime story. This essay argues that crime conventions, rather than serving as mere scaffolding, provide Wright with the stuff of a fable about the possibilities for individual liberation amidst the systemic iniquities of modern life—a project for which black American experience provided a particularly resonant example. By organizing my analysis around the novel's forensic framework—particularly the fingerprints, the crime scene, and the capture by police—I show how this set of popular conventions aligns with and condenses the novel's most powerful, and nuanced, ideological insights.

When J. Edgar Hoover took up the rhetoric of “scientific” crime-fighting in the 1920s and 1930s, the traceable individual began to acquire the imaginative, and real, purchase it continues to have today. Beginning with the 1930s “War on Crime” and continuing through various responsive crime bills, by the mid-1940s the FBI had established itself as the nation's undisputed law enforcement agency.⁵ The ascendancy of the new agency depended in large part on a new concept: the utterly individuated criminal-citizen, a new category of physical identity made possible almost exclusively by the technology of fingerprint matching and the enormous campaign Hoover waged to make the undisputed distinctiveness of fingerprints the stuff of household knowledge. Beyond fingerprints, the allure of “forensic” evidence then was much the same as it is today, characterized by replacing, or corroborating, the temperamental memories and shifty glances of eyewitness testimony with the steady gaze of science. According to Hoover's message to the public, the new methods of interpreting evidence *forensically* alleviated the justice system of the uncertainties of contingent narratives. The national law enforcement agency, and the forensic techniques at its disposal, offered a way of interpreting signs of guilt and identity that—ostensibly—had no intrinsic investment in the kind of story one might want to

Wright simply will not trust his own tale to do the work; whether the keystone is Existentialism or Freudianism, the inside narrative is made damagingly explicit. Wright's philosophical interest thereby throws the drama of his novels out of balance, their inside direction far too available from the outset.” A. Robert Lee, “Inside Narratives” from *American Fiction: New Readings* (1983), essay collected in Bloom, *ibid.* 124.

⁴ *Jet*, March 26, 1953. 42.

⁵ Regarding the centrality of both the “War on Crime” and the New Deal to the creation of the FBI, see Claire Bond Potter, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1998) and Bryan Burroughs, *Public Enemies: America's Great Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI, 1933-34* (Penguin: New York, 2004).

believe true. Much like the valuable details of civil rights movement history preserved by the excessive surveillance of the FBI, with forensic science Hoover had unwittingly introduced a way of thinking about proving identity and rendering justice that logically appeared to transcend some of the institutionalized hierarchies to which he himself was fiercely committed.⁶

As a young boy in the early 1920s, Richard Wright enjoyed, and was profoundly influenced by, crime-oriented pulp fiction.⁷ By the 1930s, when Wright began reading and writing in earnest in Chicago, he witnessed the celebrated “great crime wave” that figured most dramatically in the widely followed hunts for John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde Barrow, Machine Gun Kelly, Pretty Boy Floyd, and other famous fugitives. John Dillinger’s chase from 1933 to 1934 was the nation’s most publicized “manhunt” ever, and gave Hoover an ideal narrative with which to disseminate the story of the newly traceable individual. In one typical documentary film produced by the FBI and Universal Pictures in 1937, the narrator’s voice speaks dramatically over an image of Dillinger’s official ten-print identification sheet. Gloating over Dillinger’s capture, Lowell Thomas intones: “His fingerprints, the infallible sign. He spent \$5,000 to have them altered with acid, but it failed. Three hundred points of similarity remained. His face made over. But still the G-men recognized him.”⁸ The force and implicit promise of the G-Men’s new powers consisted essentially of the ability to “see,” and thereby *capture*, a particular *individual* regardless of race, class, or gender. Though Dillinger’s capture was finally brought about thanks more to witness testimonies than to forensic evidence, through Hoover’s careful manipulation and publicizing Dillinger’s pursuit and eventual death at Chicago’s Biograph Theater in 1934 catalyzed the creation and popularity of the modern “scientific” FBI.

Thereafter, FBI-sponsored stories of forensically-derived captures circulated widely. Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and Biggie Thomas emerged during the same years, and their stories often incorporated fingerprint evidence in one way or another as the trace of criminal identity that could always be recognized unequivocally by the authorities and against which the

⁶ Wright would also eventually develop his own personal relationship to Hoover’s FBI, as the agency collected a generous file on him during the last half of his life, a surveillance memorably noted in Wright’s satiric poem “FBEye Blues.” A quote from Wright’s FBI file that serves as the epigraph to Addison Gayle’s biography is telling of such a history inadvertently produced by the agents: “His interest in the problems of the Negro was almost an obsession.” Quoted by Gayle from FBI File #100-157464, Feb. 26, 1945. Addison Gayle, *The Ordeal of Richard Wright* (Garden City: Anchor Press: 1980).

⁷ Wright’s interest in and debt to true crime and crime fiction is well-documented. See for example: Robert Butler, “The Loeb and Leopold Case: A Neglected Source for Richard Wright’s ‘Native Son’” *African American Review*, vol. 39, no. 4 (Winter 2005) 555-67; Ross Pudaloff, “Celebrity as Identity: Richard Wright, *Native Son* and Mass Culture.” *Studies in American Fiction II* (Spring 1983) 3-18; Paula Rabinowitz, “Double Cross: Wri(gh)ting as *The Outsider*” in *Black and White and Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia U P, 2001) 82-104; as well as several biographies including: Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Holt, 2001) 30; Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: Morrow, 1973) 68; and Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (New York: Amistad P, 1988).

⁸ Film, “You Can’t Get Away With It” (1936) produced by FBI/Universal Pictures. FBI records, National Archives II, College Park.