CHAPTER THREE

‘THE HEROISM OF VISION’: RICHARD WRIGHT AND DOCUMENTARY MODERNITY

But

Shouldn't this state

Have a song?

And shall we call it

My face will murder me?

And shall we call it

I'm not waiting?

–Cornelius Eady, "Alabama, c. 1963: A Ballad by John Coltrane."

My only sin

Is in my skin,

What did I do

To be so black and blue?

–Andy Razaf, "Black and Blue."

If somebody told me I had only one hour to live,

I'd spend it choking a white man. I'd do it nice and slow.

–Miles Davis.

While one may not always accept Harold Bloom's thesis on anxiety and influence, in every literary tradition there are instances of 'later' writers writing back to a grand sire, real or imagined, fashioned as a pioneer. Richard Wright's relationship with W. E. B. Du Bois can be explained both in terms of an acknowledgement and creative antagonism. This chapter tries to contextualize Wright's public and private disagreements with Du Bois, premised on the presumption that each man rode out a version of modernity that he saw fit for his age and community. The story that the chapter pursues, therefore, is not of a singular African American modernity as imagined by Du Bois but also a vision of modernity pursued by Richard Wright. To the extent that these trajectories accommodate

both conformity and contest, as shown in the subsequent readings, the main objectives of the chapter are:

(i) to show how Wright introduced a genre of writing that focused on the perennial conflict between the concepts of 'seeing' and 'knowing;'
(ii) to examine if Wright's double vision—a reworking of Du Bois' "double consciousness"— is grounded in Wright's lifelong preoccupation with race as an ocular fact/medium;
(iii) to show how Wright's modernity, or say his trajectory of individuality is rooted in a sense of alienation; quite contrary to Du Bois' sense of belongingness in the 'blacks' and being hopeful about it; and
(iv) to examine the gaps and continuities with Du Bois.

The hypothesis is that Richard Wright formulates a thesis of modernity by insisting on the "heroism of vision" (Sontag 65). In other words, it can be said that the ocular can be a significant medium through which modernities are articulated and contested. Wright appropriates this medium and develops an African American narrative that uses the ocular in its sensory as well as technological variations.

The chapter deals with the analysis of three primary texts: *Native Son* (1940), *Black Boy* (1945) and *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). *Native Son* is on the surface a shocking narrative of motiveless malignity, conditioned by belonging to the Negro community, his detestation for it due to the group's languishing in a space which has no voice and words but only submissiveness. A racial tension pervades the novel, which predates the noir of the later years in its recidivism and a follow- up of one crime after another, tinged with a moral ambiguity. *12 Million Black Voices* is the non -fiction companion to *Native Son*, documenting black lives, without coloring it with glory but focused specially during a period (The Great Migration) particularly ignored, in its depiction of the shock that accompanied the African American life on being thrust with American modernity. *Black Boy* is the autobiography of Wright, covering years of his childhood and his journey to the South. These works, read in conjunction, point to the trajectory that Wright's modernity thesis has traversed, grounded in the idea of vision: from 'seeing' to documentary photography.

Visuality in Wright

While photography democratizes experiences, it is also fraught with the gaze of prejudice in weighing who and what deserves to be recorded. With respect to the centrality of 'vision' in his work, the chapter tries to place the thrust of "killing the documentarian" (Balthaser), meaning literally in one sense and replacing the role of a white gaze with an African American one (and hence from within the community) in another within a project of framing a documentary modernity. In the process, a dynamic visual culture is shaped which uses this technology of representation. While representation implicates both the self and the other, the chapter uses Paul de Man's essay "Autobiography as De-facement" both to understand and question the possibilities of self- making in autobiography as well as Wright's incorporation of fictional elements and events in his autobiography. The perspective is to go beyond Wright's over-discussed introduction to the genre of protest literature and examine his works as intertextual experiments with existing genres of writing.

I argue that in his attempt to carry the present into the future via documentary photographs, Wright is providing for his readers what Roland Barthes calls "temporal hallucination" (Barthes 115). This, in turn, propels an African American past (for later generations that is to say) into the viewer's present. Of course, this depends on the selection of images, and this is determined by the concerned artist's judgement on what constitutes the important and the relevant. Shawn Michelle Smith in the introduction to *Photographic Returns* (2020) sees this selection as a choice from pieces of "brute fact" (Smith 5) and endowing it with meaning by a passage from "visibility" to "legibility" (5), one that calls for the work and mind of artists and scholars. The unresolved tension between 'knowing' and 'seeing' can be used to define black modernity as proposed by Richard Wright. Wright, as the chapter follows, assumes the role of the artist in channelling an African American variation of documentary modernity in not just documenting the present, but "a new way of conceiving history, of apprehending a past in felt fragments" (7). In freezing these moments of history, of the past, Richard Wright's earlier fictional ventures where he insists on the act of 'seeing' and 'being 'seen' find expression and photographic legitimation.

Modernity in/and Writing: Redefining Autobiography

It was the Spanish philosopher Dussel who said that a philosopher's, or for that matter, any person's life can be understood only through a relation to the "concrete historical period(s) through which that life extends" (Dussel xiv). The idea can be extended to Du Bois' and Wright's lives to understand the great diversity of positions they took up, and also the movement through places.

While Du Bois himself admitted to the fact that he had had a relatively privileged childhood and education and did not experience racism first hand until he moved to the south, Wright's trajectory is entirely different. Born and brought up in the south and a childhood devoid of any elements traditionally associated with it, growing up switching jobs, not to forget the acute poverty and corruption he is surrounded with, Wright's life sums up the southern experience of the blacks in the face of racism and unabashed segregation. The poverty and corruption in his childhood can be understood by the following:

> I was a drunkard in my sixth year, before I had begun school. With a gang of children I roamed the streets, begging pennies from passers-by, haunting the doors of saloons, wandering farther and farther away from home each day. I saw more than I could understand and heard more than I could remember. The point of life became for me the times when I could beg drinks. My mother was in despair. She beat me, then she prayed and wept over me, imploring me to be good, telling me that she had to work, all of which carried no weight to my wayward mind. Finally she placed me and my brother in the keeping of an old black woman who watched me every moment to keep me from running to the doors of the saloons to beg for whisky. The craving for alcohol finally left me and I forgot the taste of it. (Wright, *Black Boy* 20)

From picking up odd jobs to an emotional graph ranging from "Emotional rejection of the whites" and "Increased emotional rejection of the whites" to "Wishing the enemy was dead" (79), Wright's autobiography captures the ethos of the young black people thrust into a white dominant society and expected to earn and survive through it. Wright's venture into autobiography also cast heavy criticism on what an autobiography is supposed to do for a generation of people who have been meted out racial treatment in their everyday life. When it came out, it created quite a range of responses from the

intellectual quarters. Du Bois, who emerged in these years as a spokesperson for the race found it difficult to believe in the 'autobiography' and its events. His March 4, 1945 comments on *Black Boy* published in the New York *Herald Tribune* denies credence to Wright's narrative: "The hero whom Wright draws, and maybe it is himself, is in his childhood a loathsome brat, foul-mouthed and a drunkard" (qtd. in McCall 30). Here, "maybe" hints at doubtfulness with regard to the possibilities of reading *Black Boy* as a veritable account of a southerner. Du Bois also questions the credibility of the world that Wright paints, in the people around him and whether that only furthers the white definition of blacks as depraved beings: "the Negroes whom he paints have almost no redeeming qualities. Some work hard, some are sly, many are resentful; but there is none who is ambitious, successful, or really intelligent" (30). These are the very adjectives associated with African Americans which Du Bois has been trying all life to disassociate from African American lives. Du Bois' worries cannot be dismissed, but it also triggers the implicit expectation of a responsibility that someone's life (and its writing) takes up for a greater population. To put Wright's writing into perspective, *Black Boy* redefines the genre of autobiography. While *Black Boy* provided content for criticism and appreciation alike, its credence was questioned. This is an aspect that autobiography constantly grapples with, more so when Wright writes from an African American background and rarely showcasing any solidarity with them, leave portraying them in a bright manner. Much of it has to do with the expectations that autobiographies are frequently overwrought with. Paul de Man, in "Autobiography as De-facement" (1979) considers these "confining" and "stymied" (919), and these are the premises on which his two major arguments in the essay are based.

The Specular and Spectral Selves of Wright

The first of these arguments is that autobiography is a "figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement" 921). This renders it far off from the concerns over the truth and fiction in autobiography in that if it is the genre which most sticks to facts or if it is a curious mixture of fact and fiction. The second argument is that reading and understanding are processes which contribute to the formation of the subject. That is to say, in proposing that there are autobiographical moments in a text, he espouses that the processes of reading and writing are analogous to autobiographical self-making. This springs from the fact that both these processes unfold through a series of "imaginary self-identifications"

(Ramadanovic, "Black Boy's Comedy" 155). In proposing that there are autobiographical moments in a text and taking up as his sample of discussion not an autobiography per se but Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*, de Man establishes the 'specular' aspect of reading and writing. The autobiographical moment in a text is hinted at through these specular moments, these moments of identification between the author (or the reader) and the self in the narrative. The goal of such identification is the restoration of the author's (or the reader's identity). With regard to imagination (which includes dreams and fantasies) in an autobiographical reading of a text, or rather in the commonly accepted material which falls within the ambit of autobiography, de Man says:

> Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name. (920)

Phantasms and dreams come within the scope of imagination, and when incorporated in an autobiography, it aims to restore the author's identity. This role is emphasised a bit later here. It needs to be considered here the demarcations imposed on truth and falsity, and kinds of it, and whether an autobiography subscribes to such watertight categories. Petar Ramadanovic in his essay "Black Boy's Comedy: Indestructibility and Anonymity in Autobiographical Self -Making" (2004) refers to two truths that *Black Boy* and its consequent criticism seem to grapple with: "truth as adequation" (correct autobiography) and "truth as semblance" (emotionally true autobiography) (158). However, the implications of Wright's narrative go beyond this simplistic choice that seems to be reduced from a single line that Wright offers as his reaction to one particular incident: "I did not know if the story was factually true or not, but it was emotionally true" (Wright, *Black Boy* 71). The incident under emphasis is that of an African American woman whose husband was tragically killed by a mob. In a swift turn of events, under the vow that she would avenge the death of her husband, and at first pleading before the white men that she be allowed to take her husband's body for burial, unwraps a sheet which covered a gun. Before the staring men could realise anything, she shot four of them. What engenders in Wright is a wish to emulate the woman if ever he would face a white

mob who had wronged him. The detailed description of what he wishes to do focuses on pent up feeling in a black boy towards the injustice meted out to him all his life:

> I resolved that I would emulate the black woman if I were ever faced with a white mob; I would conceal a weapon, pretend that I had been crushed by the wrong done to one of my loved ones; then just when they thought I accepted their cruelty as the law of my life, I would let go with my gun and kill as many of them as possible before they killed me. The story of the woman's deception gave form and meaning to confused defensive feelings that had long been sleeping in me. (71-72)

The last line puts into perspective the pent-up feelings already mentioned. It is here that the concerns over truth and fiction, claims over restoration of an identity and place of imagination and fantasies that both define and critique *Black Boy*. Wright goes on to describe his "imaginings" and "fantasies" (72) as an enabler, keeping his emotional integrity whole, "a support that enabled my personality to limp through days lived under the threat of violence" (72). While the trust and falsity of such narrative is contested, it is too simplistic to be analysed thus. This incident, and the consequent "emotionally true" aspect of it moves deeper than being held through for the entire book and its impact on the readers in terms of representation of African American life. Like de Man says, the dreams and phantasies in an autobiography belong to a simpler mode of referentiality. In Wright's case then, the 'deviations' remain rooted to his experiences as a person. His 'imaginings' can be understood as a trope that autobiography uses for the purpose of restoration of the subject's identity, prosopopeia. Paul de Man defines it as "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless identity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (926). That is to say, prosopopeia links together entities which are living and dead, absent and present, actual and imagined. In an autobiography, it figures as a trope to relate the self of the author to a multitude of past selves. Picking up from de Man, all the past selves are given a 'voice', which are transformed into selves and which leads to identification with the author. Ramadanovic offers a provisional understanding (on autobiography) of de Man's premise:

> It is a writing defined by the author's now moment, from which the author projects a fantasmic, subjective unity onto the past and creates a continuity

> between past and present, the absent selves and a given self that is present to itself. (157)

A few passages preceding Wright's fantasy of emulating the woman's reaction who shoots her husband's wrongdoers, there is a passage where contemplates on his powerlessness with respect to the world he is in. Since "had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world" (Wright 70), he turns within to make things happen. His imagination compensates for the lost opportunities to even out things in the real world. This becomes a prelude to understanding both the text as an autobiography and the place of "imaginings" in it. His "bare and bleak" (Wright, *Black Boy* 70) world is endowed with unlimited possibilities and redeemed through his yearning to do the same. Until this time, African American autobiographies performed the dual function of chronicling one's life as well as exemplifying it, in the sense of something to be followed, or serve as inspirational. William L. Andrews's "Richard Wright and the African-American Autobiography Tradition" offers a perspective to how African American autobiography has changed over time and how Wright's *Black Boy* initiates a new conversation on this mode of writing. He starts it with:

> To tell the whole truth in the name of complete honesty or to conceal part of the truth out of deference to white readers' sensibilities- this dilemma and the anxiety it spawned have haunted African American autobiography since its beginnings. (127)

The dilemma that Andrews talks about has shaped trends in African American autobiography. It is important to consider the change in scenes regarding the discourses that inform these autobiographies. There has been a replacement of a discourse of "distrust and self-restraint" which was the characteristic of autobiographies prefaced (and legitimised) by white authors by a discourse that endorses "frank self-expression" to maintain "authenticity and independent self-authorization" (127). Taking into consideration that Du Bois precedes this one, it would be legitimate to bring Du Bois' autobiography and its purported aim to this discussion. The choice between self-expressiveness and self-restraint continued from the antebellum autobiographies (a classic example being Harriet Jacobs's "I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary my descriptions fall far short of the facts"). However, barring a few of *Black Boy'*s contemporaries, the prefaces introduced by the writers themselves or

by another intellectual voice were done away with. Du Bois, in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* however prefaces an "apology" that depreciates "mere autobiography" and at the same time severs black autobiographies from any charges of "reticences, repressions and distortions which come because men do not dare to be absolutely frank" (Du Bois, *Dusk* 1). The implications were that these restraints were characteristics of autobiographical writing and not something exclusive to black autobiographies. However, his autobiography assumes a new role for itself as is evident in the subtitle. He desubjectivizes his work, ripping it from the confines of personality and extending it to the experience of a whole race. The elements of truth and sincerity receive a new rubric, in that not the truth of a particular person is within the precinct of his autobiography but "the sincerity of the historian- sociologist impartially dedicated to recovering the Truth of his era" (Andrews 132).

Black Boy has *A Record of Childhood and Youth* as its subtitle. Its 1945 edition had its introductory note written by Dorothy Canfield Fisher and it laid no emphasis on any ameliorative effect that it might have on its reader. Instead, Fisher uses three adjectives, "honest," "dreadful" and "heart-breaking" for Wight's autobiography. The question of sincerity so pertinent to autobiography till then was supplanted by self-authentication. Wright's writing paved the way for a newer articulation of selfhood. This mode of autobiographical writing is not conceptualized to serve as a model to be followed by a community, as in the case of Booker T. Washington and Du Bois, but as a mode of writing in which one looks back at what happened and what could have been. As Andrews suggests, Wright's autobiography provides a break with the notion of exemplum as arduously followed by his predecessors. Instead of telling the community what to do and what not to do, purely on the basis of his own example, Wright foregrounds a moment in life writing where one looks back at what happened and what could have been: "Wright in fact authenticates himself as the quintessentially authentic modern writer, devoted absolutely to expression of self, indifferent to any external standard, especially that of pleasing or improving the reader" (Andrews 135).

The modernity as expressed in Wright, and in his autobiographical venture is an expression of the self. One can retrospectively order one's life and show the epistemological divide between the self that participates in the world of action and the self that 'sees' and examines that 'actant' self, seeing it as different from the agenciary self. This ability to articulate the examined self in black writing is one of the moments of

modernity. Writing becomes here as much a comment on life as on writing. This self is articulated both in the incidents that he mentions in the book as well in his act of writing. Regarding the former, and his perpetual quest of asserting the self in spite of obstructions both from blacks as well as whites, a particular passage seems to capture it in spirit:

> What Griggs was saying was true, but it was simply utterly impossible for me to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot all the time. I would remember to dissemble for short periods, then I would forget and act straight and human again, not with the desire to harm anybody, but merely forgetting the artificial status of race and class. It was the same with whites as with blacks; it was same with everybody. (Wright, *Black Boy* 186)

This is Wright's mediation on being told to 'act' like a black. Griggs, his friend, prescribes some workplace ethics for Wright, of how he should always remember that he is black. He tells Griggs how he can't be a slave and this extends to his relationship with fellow blacks too. He was lured by the "bloody thunder of pulp narrative" (156) rather than by The Bible stories. He retaliated to authority, irrespective of racial denomination. Wright makes a conscious attempt at self- authentication by exposing the shallowness of the world he lived in. Nobody is spared, not even his family and a dismal picture of the black community is portrayed. His younger years sank into a dilemma of determining whether one is supposed to "surrender to authority even if one believed that the authority was wrong" (165) and the possibilities of surviving in a world in which "one's mind and perceptions meant nothing and authority and tradition meant everything" (165). While the world around him tries to fit in 'tradition' and remember that blacks are meant to 'act' like black, Wright juxtaposes himself against the whole community. He is cast aside be blacks and whites alike and this becomes his mode of self-authenticating and achieving artistic integrity.

> Every time the black boy is told to shut up or is slapped on the mouth, every time he shocks someone with his writing or is punished by someone in power for refusing to censor himself, Wright, in effect, authenticates himself as the quintessentially authentic modern writer, devoted absolutely to expression of self, indifferent to any external standard, especially that of pleasing or improving the reader. (Andrews 135)

To put it more precisely, Wright channelises a mode of autobiographical self-authenticating that does not rely on any external yardstick but a rigorous form of self-expression. The vagaries of character that interracial existence seeks to normalise is contended by Wright. While earlier autobiographies see an African American individual shaped by the community and in the process, establishing oneself as the hero to be emulated, Wright's autobiography incorporates dreams and imagination alike to establish a narrative that resurfaces supressed desires and actual events. Going back to the point that this section started with, that is, verifiability, it can be said while quoting Ralph Ellison that "man cannot express that which does not exist–either in the form of dreams, ideas and realities- in his environment" ("Richard Wright's Blues" 14). This goes to explain his fantasies, and their place in a supposed autobiography that claims to record his childhood and youth. Even injustices meted out receive the intended result in dreams. There is a moving instance of how his grandfather was denied disability pension after being wounded in the Civil War, all because a white officer misspelled his name as Richard Vinson instead of Richard Wilson. A dream substitutes the actual claim of pension being granted, following a correction of the name and an apology for years of deprivation from what he rightfully deserved:

> We regret profoundly that you have been so long delayed in this matter. You may be assured that your sacrifice has been a boon and solace to your country. (Wright, *Black Boy* 139)

In Wright's alienation from the community, in his sequences of imagination and dreams that constitute an important part of his autobiography is an important statement of self-authenticating. Later ventures into autobiographical writing owe to Wright, if not anything else, a confidence in the mode of self-authenticating rather than being backed by white-authored prefaces and lending veracity to one's own experiences. The 'tactic,' as Andrews terms it, to critique the entire African- American community, render them inauthentic, clinging to artificial standards to appease to tradition. While Du Bois had such good faith in the community, Wright shows it to be lacking essential values of humanity. There are a number of passages on this analysis, the sum of it to point to the "strange absence of real kindness in Negroes," a lack of genuine passion and "those sentiments that bind man to man" (Wright, *Black Boy* 35). The book abounds in passages of Wright being beaten up by his family for silly and serious issues alike. The modernity that has been thrust on the African Americans make them live "somehow in it and not of

it" (35). This is dealt with elaborately in *12 Million Black Voices*, discussed in the later part of the chapter. In surviving in this society which he calls 'bleak,' writing offers both an escape and an assertion of the self. In the apparent barrenness of possibilities, the black boy recreates himself in his writings and brings his personalities to bring to fruition those intentions which were impossible in the real world, in order to give "form and meaning to confused defensive feelings that had long been sleeping in me" (72). Writing assures for him to keep his "emotional integrity whole" (72). Ramadonovic puts it precisely in securing for Wright his writing as" "*the* way of survival". He identifies 'hunger' as a trope through which Wright the process of self-making take place. Of course, hunger assumes different connotations in the course of his autobiography: hunger in its obvious implication while leading a life of abject poverty, hunger for knowledge and then emancipation from the South which could be assured by his movement northward. Hunger assumes the role of a figure, prosopopoeia, as already discussed (as the figure of the sun in de Man's essay reading of Wordsworth's text and a line of father figures in the latter's invocation of Shakespeare and Milton), in that Wright equates it with his father, his image being associated with "pangs of hunger" and a recalling of it would incite some "deep biological bitterness" (Wright, *Black Boy* 14). Hunger is the trope, a nameless figure though, through which the author restores himself. In the absence of any real figures who he could emulate, Wright channels his self-making through a repeated pattern of restoration.

There are failings and regenerations alike, starting from his four-year-old self who burns his own house, kills a kitten, becomes a drunkard at six, abhors the black community and the religiousness of his family alike. This leads to his ultimate realisation of the potential and possibilities of words, in realising through his readings and imagining a man (the writer) as "a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American… this man was fighting, fighting with words" (250). Writing helps him rewrite his past, as in *Black Boy* and regeneration goes beyond the self, to the self of a writer who narrates a tale of emancipation. This narrative of overcoming of trials, tribulations and obstacles is common in African American literature and folklore. Wright's modernity—in giving it a unique perspective—is that his repetitions pit the individual writer against a collective/ community which is tethered to codes and traditions under the rubric of racial differences. Wright brings into play an 'imaginary' that attempts to self-restore, so much so that he channels an obvious

autofiction (a term first used by Serge Doubrovsky to describe his work *Fils*). Moving back to de Man, Wright's attempt to rewrite (and in the process, redefine autobiography) dismantles the assumption that "life produces an autobiography as an act produces its consequences" (921). This is substituted by a nod to de Man's contemplation that the autobiographical project may in effect determine the life that is written down and the writer conforms to the technical demands of "self-portraiture" as well as channelling his narrative through "the resources of his medium" (920). That is to say, while autobiography in Wright sticks to writing one's life, it also incorporates the indices of self-authentication and restoration and this was unique to black autobiography of his times.

Towards the end of *Black Boy*, Wright begins his journey to the north. He ponders on what his hope means and where it springs from, when all his life he was in a "gross environment that sought to claim". Wright attributes a belief in possibilities to his 'accidental' readings of fiction and literary criticism. Moreover, writers he read, like Dreiser, Mencken etc. were "defensively critical" of America, in that they believed that it could be "shaped nearer to the hearts of those who lived in it" (260). These imaginative constructions created an emotional impact on Wright's young mind. It is to no surprise then that writing is 'the' way of survival to him.

Through the Eyes of the Margin: The Ocular in Richard Wright

Black Boy ends with Richard Wright's journey to the North. However much he contemplates on how the South failed to understand him, he ends on a paradoxical note when he claims that deep down, he knew that he could "never really leave the South" (262). This follows that he would carry a part of the South with him: the South 'allowing' him to be natural only in rejection, rebellion and aggression (261). Being shaped by the other and curbing what somebody 'might' actually have been are the reflections at the end of his autobiography. This seems appropriate, given Wright's preoccupation with the ocular as a medium through which a self is constructed as well as distorted. The visual medium and the ocular as a fact of determining race relations receive a modernist take in Wright. This is a major development from Du Bois and his visual vocabulary. Wright ventures into fictional and non-fictional ventures which situate the act of seeing as the catalyst of events in Native Son as well as an impetus to documentary modernity in *12 Million Black Voices.*

To begin with, *12 Million Black Voices* is Wright's documentary project that blends words and photographs. In "The Author as Producer" (1934) Walter Benjamin among many relevant issues addresses the role of the author, the hazy aphorisms of form and content, tendencies (political and literary) in writing etc. Photography in general, or documentary photography and visual vocabulary in particular, has a long history and it's not surprising to find that blending the written word and photographs came with the putative benefits of modernity. If writing did not suffice to a growing mass of readers who had a tilt towards the visual, photography answered this demand. Benjamin, in the said essay, speaks about 'functional transformation', a term borrowed from Brecht, in that the apparatus, whatever be, needs to be changed/ transformed from the inside. "New Objectivity," in terms of the art of photography fails here, in merely including pictures of subjects previously avoided or deemed improper to the artsy eye. For it was merely replacing subjects; "to change it would have meant overthrowing another of the barriers.…the barrier between writing and image" (Benjamin 775). If such is how the logic of 'change' operates, or modernity manifests, perhaps W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) and Richard Wright (1908-1960) would be the stalwarts who were the pioneers of an intellectual movement. They propelled a change mostly through mixing genres, better still, assimilating them and going beyond the boundaries of the propaganda artist.

It would be justified to say that *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) is the non-fiction companion to *Native Son* (1940). The practice of 'seeing,' in the sense of transgression or even vigilance it accompanies in respect of the white gaze, is shifted, in Wright, to the black. *12 Million Black Voices* highlights the importance of 'seeing'. However, instead of the white observer 'seeing' and showing the world, Richard Wright shifts the burden of seeing to the black writer. This is both a privilege and a challenge that was not seen in black writing so far. In using the first-person plural as the narrative voice, Wright posits the book as the collective voice of the number mentioned in the title. Of course, Wright could do that, for, as David Bradley mentions in the introduction to the book, "he had followed the ebb and flow of the river of black life in a way that no other writer of the day had. He alone had the right to say "we"". The selection of sights and images is not random but is determined by what constitutes the real, giving the work an "impressionistic structure". A true representation of what physical and mental journeys a population had to face while moving North from the South, *12 Million* is a testimony to the vast majority of African American population forced with the modern phenomenon

of urbanization while racism and segregation were already the strangleholds they were battling with. While *Native Son* had put in Bigger Thomas and his life a shocking narrative of living conditions, crime and violence, *12 Million* comes up as a proof in paperback of what life for the Negro really is. While Bigger is a murky character and Wright faced many criticisms regarding the representation of the black character in fiction (prominent among which was Baldwin's); that moment when Mary utters her wish to 'see' how the blacks, for they 'too' are humans, makes Bigger acutely aware of himself and the reader feels in him an aching black consciousness:

> 'You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into those houses,'…. and just *see* how your people live. We know so *little* about each other. I just want to *see*. I want to know these people. Never in my life have I seen a Negro home. Yet they *must* live like we live. They're *human...*' (Wright, *Native* 101)

Native Son allegorizes the violation – real and imagined – of social spaces allocated to blacks and whites. There are two cases, one relating to Mary (quoted above) and another relating to Bigger that may serve to illustrate the allocation of social spaces and the implication of any violation of such spaces. Mary's desire to 'see' is reminiscent of Jacob Riss' work *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which included photographs taken of squalid corners of New York slums between 1887-90, already other-ing a section of the American population in its title. The italicised words from Mary's conversation with Bigger are paradoxical. While it aims at bridging gaps, it also affirms alienation in that everything is grounded on assumption: even the fact that Bigger and the likes could (*must*) be humans. The insistence on seeing or in critical terms, the hierarchy of the white gaze is something that Wright used more than once in his career. His understanding of race as an ocular fact is a pointer to the concept of double vision, reworking W. E. B. Du Bois' double consciousness. This want, to *see,* already establishes the African American life as inhabiting a periphery which must be explored or understood by the whites.

While being an attempt to reach out, one cannot ignore the patronizing gaze that Mary unconsciously adopts. Of course, she is a likeable character and her death at the hands of Bigger and his subsequent actions to hide the murder that he commits by mistake invite the reader's horror and disgust. However, the italicised words also imply Bigger's aching black consciousness that Mary quite innocently incites through her words and behaviour. Before this conversation, he is sandwiched between Mary and her

friend Jan in her car when the latter overtook the task of driving, insisting on Bigger sitting between them (the two whites). It seems Bigger has never been this close to the whites before and his blackness haunts him throughout, a sense of difference impinging on him:

> His arms and legs were aching from being cramped into so small a space, but he dared not move. He knew that they would not have cared if he had made himself more comfortable, but his moving would have called attention to himself and his black body. And he did not want that. These people made him feel things he did not want to feel. If he were white, if he were like them, it would have been different. But he was black. So he sat still, his arms and legs aching. (Wright, *Native* 100)

The passages highlight the social and affective tension in co-inhabiting intimate spaces of any sort. There is also a constant attempt to evade one's identity or perhaps pretending to remain oblivious of one's self (if being conscious of one's colour and hence race can be counted as one). Apart from the sexual and affective disjunction suggested in the physical proximity of black and white, the passages take us back to a potentially troubling aspect of black-white encounters mentioned by Hegel. The insertion of the black body into the discursive encounter of blacks and whites invokes spectres of social violence, not just affective and epistemic violations.

Wright initiates race here as an ocular phenomenon, and hence his idea, consolidated to "double vision" finds its predecessor in Mary's desire to *see*. While earlier theses on modernity attribute a recovery of African American cultural art forms from the ever-looming dangers of being shoved under the project of homogenization, Wright makes a case-study of white characters in his novel. In doing so, he establishes the positions of both African Americans and the whites through the ocular sensation. It is 'seeing' which establishes the characters' place in the surrounding world (Berger). Mary's desire to 'see' immediately establishes Bigger and Bigger's world as an unexplored territory, hence the inquisitiveness. Berger establishes a friction between 'what we see' and what we know'. This is to say, there is something unsettling between these two cognitions: our act of seeing assumes the relation between that thing and ourselves. Mary's desire to see is conditioned by her relation to the black world. In her capacity as a white, she can 'choose' or wish to see say, a 'Negro household'. In

Bigger's case, there is an overwhelming hatred for Mary because he sees her (a white woman) in relation to himself (African American). This sensory medium then, is tinged, in *Black Boy* for instance with racially determined relations. Bigger's black consciousness, which is anything but conducive to interpersonal relationships, aggravates in white presence, in being 'observed' by them. Even uncomfortable situations, like sitting in a cramped space, do not result in any attempt at resolution or adjustment because of an 'aching' black consciousness, a fear of being 'seen' or attracting attention. While Du Bois' "double consciousness" engendered dual lives for the African American, Wright's locus of 'seeing' engenders paradoxically efforts at oblivion.

Taking the Position of the Documentarian: Wright and Documentary Photography

In the project that Wright takes up in *12 Million Black Voices,* he states the images that will be left out:

> …those areas of Negro life which comprise the so called Talented Tenth or the isolated islands of mulatto leadership which are still to be found in many parts of the South, or the growing and influential Negro middle class professional and business men of the North, who have, for the past thirty years or more, formed a sort of liaison corps between the whites and the blacks. (Preface to *12 Million*)

The narrative, with the collective voice of the African Americans and the photographs accompanying it carries dismal pictures of what the South endured, chronicling also the Great Migration to north, away from cotton and tobacco plantations and slavery but thrust into new prisons in the form of accommodation reserved for African Americans. These selections are full of hope and despair of the people, singing music with hope and fun, and faces of despair again, underscoring the irony and hope that go together in such melodies:

> We pour forth in song and dance, without stint or shame, a sense of what our bodies want, a hint of our hope of a full life lived without fear, a whisper of the natural dignity we feel life can have, a cry of hunger for something new to fill our souls, to reconcile the ecstasy of living with the terror of dying… (Wright, *12 Million* 126)

Far from the usual depiction of the African American in photography as an anthropological/ scientific subject, these are a concerted effort aimed at showing more

than slavery and lynching. It captures the changing role of the African Americans; from the sharecropper (Fig. 6) to the industrial worker (Fig. 7), from viewing cotton as a product of the field to a drug: "Cotton is a drug, and for three hundred years we have taken it to kill the pain of hunger; but it does not ease our suffering" (59), women crossing the fence of slavery (in all exclusivity) to attain Mammy-hood: "many of our women, after they were too old to work, were allowed to remain in the slave cabins to tend generations of black children. They enjoyed a status denied us men, being called "Mammy"; and through the years they became symbols of motherhood, retaining in their withered bodies the burden of folk wisdom..." (37). With the advent of modernity, even the work culture changes. With picks replacing mops, brooms replaced by hammers and pushing levers instead of dust-cloths, the erstwhile slaves, rooted in rural life of the plantations confront the modern urban life. The liberation, clouded by the endless struggle of the new life is aptly captured within each frame in the book: with the subjects sometimes staring blankly, sometimes giving a picture of wasting away life in the tiny rooms meant for them, in filth and hunger—specifically the kitchenette (Fig. 8)— and the prose descriptions accompanying the transition and everyday challenges that the visuals convey. In thus merging the two forms, photography and writing, Wright holds true to Benjamin's prediction that "we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force" (771). He in a way follows a trajectory from Mary's desire to *see*, to inclusion of photographs in *12 Million Black Voices* to theorising "double vision", all the while insisting on the ocular as the potent force that determines racism but at the same time the medium through which it can be critiqued and used up by the 'other'. The selection of images can be explained by Berger's unwillingness to reduce the use of photography to a 'mechanical' exercise.

> An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved- for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights….The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. (Berger 10)

Wright's impulse to document lives overthrows the privileged subject of knowing, always subsumed by the 'white gaze'. In doing this, he reverses the existing hierarchy of seeing by placing himself (an African American) in the subject position of knowledge-power. Susan Sontag considers the act of photographing an event, as one of conferring importance. True to this, Wright included images which were important to him. This was a clear reaction to Du Bois' compilation of photographs for the "American Negro" exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Du Bois, as can be understood, selected images that showed prosperous African Americans, effluent and scholarly. His preoccupation with the "sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others" propelled this selection; for any representation before this focused on animal-like depiction, wanting of culture, and even criminal-like. Du Bois' was a conscious effort to posit a picture of his people as refined and educated, and by no means biologically inferior to the whites. His 363 images of African Americans collected from unidentified sources is a deliberate attempt at disruption of the general delineation of this people and an alternative 'visual' of what they embody. The selection is remarkable, but it invited criticism from the likes of Wright and he includes in *12 Million* all those aspects of Negro life ignored by Du Bois in the exhibition. It is understandable again from the point of view of the life and times he has undergone. Going back to Berger again: "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak" (Berger 7). It is quite clear here that Wright's selection of images is determined by his own experiences of 'seeing' his African American brothers and sisters in conditions depicted in the photographs.

The fact that Wright comes from a rural and semi-urbanized South plantation setting also means that he is challenged by the new life, specially by the volume of poverty, crime among the African Americans. Overlooking this —that is not seeing, preserving, archiving it— would have obliterated the transition of the 'Negro' life — South to north, rural to urban, one kind of poverty to another—from history and memory, including public memory. Sontag ponders on this appropriation of photographs: "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power" (2). Wright here is dismantling the hierarchy which defines black- white discourse which precluded the blacks from creating a discourse

Du Bois and Wright both meandered from the popular discourse on racism by adopting novel narrative techniques. While reducing their contribution only to the

'visual' and the 'image' would be unjust, it is important to point out that they appropriated a medium to assert the African American identity which till then was only used to further the popular conception of the Negro as the "savage" and the "criminal". Susan Sontag, as already `mentioned, considers this both as subverting the hierarchy of discourse as well as sees it as a consolidation of efforts to preserve for future generations, actively promoting nostalgia. With the advent of social media now, visuals and photographs have put a stamp on the power of the ocular as well as its legitimacy for the medium that will outlive its subjects:

> If America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the *living* past living in the present, for our memories go back, through our black folk of today, through the recollections of our black parents, and through the tales of slavery told by our black grandparents, to the time when none of us, black or white, lived in this fertile land. (Wright, *12 Million* 146)

While photographs constitute a sizeable amount of material that constitute the book, the commentary is equally important. Wright's autobiographical depiction of his younger years in *Black Boy* deals with his time in the South, along with an anticipation of what awaits him in the North. In taking a part of the South which is inextricable from his personality, he wished to "transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, responds to the warmth of other suns, and perhaps to bloom…" (Wright, *Black* 262). What happens following this wish, in its actualization, is what *12 Million* devotes a considerable attention to. The end credits of the book attribute the photographs to the Farm Security Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is interesting that Sontag cites the same venture while dwelling on the "shady commerce between art and truth" (4). She uses it as a rather unflattering exemplification of projects of photography which would impose 'standards' on its subjects.

Documentary Modernity

Benjamin Balthaser in his essay "Killing the Documentarian: Richard Wright and Documentary Modernity" examines the role of documentary photography in determining racism in general and Richard Wright's own paradoxical positioning of modernity vis-à-vis documentary photography in particular. This position is premised on the argument

that "the documentary image's dialectical mode—containing technologies of both liberation and domination—is thus Wright's precise claim on African- American modernity" (Balthaser 358). This is particularly true of Wright's logic and rhetoric to figure out the for the African American's entry into modernity vis-a vis western civilization. The African Americans have a "weird and paradoxical birth" in being thrust into a life that had the promise of "unlimited possibilities," "progress" for a certain population (the whites) and "a deadly web of slavery," "devastation" and "despair" for the people of African origin (Wright, *12 Million* 12). An alternative modernity, so as to speak, claims of a modernity predating any such infliction by the West is hinted at by Wright in his reference to a 'civilization' that is African in nature and geography:

> …the culture of many of our tribes was equal to that of the lands from which the slave captors came. We smelted iron, danced, made music, and recited folk poems; we sculptured, worked in glass, spun cotton and wool, wove baskets and cloth; we invented a medium of exchange, mined silver and gold, made pottery and cutlery; we fashioned tools and utensils of brass, bronze, ivory, quartz, and granite; we had our own literature, our own systems of law, religion, medicine, science, and education; we painted in color upon rocks; we raised cattle, sheep, and goats; we planted and harvested grain- in short, centuries before the Romans ruled, we lived as men. (13)

Historical specificities apart, each culture has a different route to modernity that is geographically and chronologically independent of other such formations. But the images circulated, racism perpetuated and documentaries made on the oppressed make it pertinent to highlight those aspects of human culture which are natural and naturalized. The historical lessons of the West make it almost mandatory for historical accounts of modernity in Africa to set the clock at the 'origin' that is neither universal nor Africa-specific.

Wright's reservations against western modernity are premised on how the destinies of African Americans were turned upside down in the wake of their entrance into modern urban life. A culture which had so much to offer to the world is not just erased from any discourse on modernity but transformed into ""big business" of the eighteenth century" (Wright, *12 Million* 13). This is achieved by a rather dismal process of turning living, breathing bodies into an industry, in a manner that "few industries the

world has ever known have yielded higher profits" (13). Attributing 'business' and 'industry' to African Americans' bodies, western modernity does not just strip them off of human attributes but encourage a hunt: "Nation waged war against nation to buy and sell us, just as today they fight for "markets and raw materials"" (13). With these overwhelmingly non-equalizing forces of modernity inciting paradoxical reactions, Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* remains a book-length documentary that traces the "painful entrance and participation of African descended peoples globally into modernity" (Balthaser 359). Modernity, even with its benefits of industrialization and urbanization, turns into an experience that is not uniform and all-encompassing. This extends from the beneficiaries of these privileges to the ones whose labours make such availing possible.

As the documentary is a powerful medium through which the West constructs and codifies the non-west, it becomes important here to consider how it features in the context of African American representation. Deborah Willis' seminal work *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, like its name suggests, is a critical insight on how African Americans have been represented across generations in photography. The dialogue that occurs between the camera of a "civilized photographer traveller" and African Americans is cast in the prejudice of representing as an 'exotic' other. Willis makes a particular case for late nineteenth century and going well into the twentieth century of women being totally ignored in their faces and focusing on the erogenous zones like the breasts and buttocks. This perpetuated a tradition where the photographers and the audience alike had a penchant for the African Americans as "animal-like, exotic, different, deviant" (Willis 19). An example is "Hottentot Venus" who attracted huge European audiences just to have a glimpse of her. All of this can be attributed to the 'image' that stereotypes the representation of a particular racial group. The appellation too is an indication of how such images and human beings are seen as a 'type', an aberration in many cases. Willis attributes such "frozen metaphors" to a lack of projects in photography "produced by or for African Americans" (17). She invokes Frederick Douglass who concluded that impartial portrait of blacks was an impossibility with white artists, for they were too busy "grossly exaggerating their distinctive features" (17). These examples enlighten two main aspects of the photographic image examined by Willis: paucity of African Americans actually taking up such project, and perpetuation of racial and derogatory stereotyping of African Americans in photography as a medium.

Shawn Michelle Smith too, in her work detects a "white, middle class subjectivity" engendered by the discourses of photography in the nineteenth century. In this dramatic manifestation of how identity and representation are constructed, Richard Wright uses a medium reserved primarily for a "white, middle class subjectivity" in his documentary venture with *12 Million.* The FSA project, exemplified in Sontag's depiction of shady commerce nevertheless was novel in its inclusion of a greater number of photographs of black life than previous government projects. It amounted to ten percent of the total images in the project. Wright uses these images to document the migration to the north and the contrasts between the promises of modernity and its actual experience by the blacks.

It can be said that the paradox of modernity in the experience of the blacks is both a condition and consequence of America's tryst with the paradox of modernity: "the *living* past living in the present" (Wright, *12 Million* 146). Wright makes use of the visual medium to show the uneven experience of modernity in terms of one's racial identity. In other words, what started as a concept of universalism, as regards access to rights and resources, is what hinders it too, in reducing the African Americans to an industry that the global powers spin their money on.

In giving a first of its kind commentary on the movement of the African Americans to the north, Wright challenges the visible regime of knowing that is reserved for the wites. As Balthaser notes, a US narrative on Great Depression conveniently evades black struggle from its representation although that accounts for a greater part of its impact on the American population. Their position is acknowledged as "unfortunate victims," but are denied a "centrepiece" (364) in the narrative. With the limited representation of African Americans in the FSA project, Wright devotes a book length documentary on a similar event that would have been denied the kind of representation it required. It enables, like Barthes said, to see oneself on the "scale of History" (Barthes 12)**.** A stereotypical politics of representation, on the other hand, contributes to relegating African Americans to a past that is defined by slavery. This is where *12 Million* exercises the power of the visual regime of knowing in taking the "past to the future" so that the struggles of freedom receive the kind of visibility that makes it possible for the African Americans to walk into a future that modernity promises**.**

Wright's photography work rests on his analysis of the 'constructedness' of images, identity and representation. It may be useful to cite Sontag's comment on the commitment of photographs to "social heights" and "lowest depths" (Sontag 48). As Sontag says, photography accrues its power from presenting itself as a "neat slice of time" (20). To present her case, Sontag uses the example of a photograph of a naked child running towards the camera with open arms. She says that the picture is more "impactful" than hours of televised images and commentaries. She distinguishes between moving images and photograph, in that the latter stays, and the viewer can always return to it.

In Wright, experiences are democratized, because it includes, to use Balthaser's term, "killing the documentarian" i.e., Mary, and assuming the role of the documentarian by Bigger Thomas. As seen in the earlier part of the chapter, Mary's intense desire 'to see' is in keeping with the documentary's visual interest in the downtrodden, the 'other' and the unknown. In this eye to know the 'other', as in Mary, the resultant change is not always what one desires for, as confirmed by *Native Son*. For all her progressive attitude towards Bigger and the blacks, Mary makes him uncomfortable through her unwanted attention. Mary's death reinforces the stereotype of black criminality. This received adverse criticism, as discussed in the next chapter. However, as Balthaser says, this particular incident does something more important than reinforcing stereotype of the black as a depraved being:

> Although Wright has been criticized most famously by James Baldwin for reproducing stereotypes of black criminality, Wright is doing something far more complicated – suggesting ways in which working-class blacks are themselves interpellated in their own racist representation, and how their ability to resist is necessarily circumscribed. (365)

In killing the "white documentarian" Mary, Bigger wrests the role of the documentarian for himself and disrupts the attempt of a white subjectivity to invade the lives of the poor blacks. While this should not be seen as a justification of Mary's brutalization, Balthaser explains the motivation by pointing out how 'being seen' through the racial lens 'constructs' the other and eventually distorts the notion of the self too. Wright himself tries to give a psychological perspective to the African Americans in his fiction as well as in real:

> The black man's is a strange situation; it is a perspective, an angle of vision held by oppressed people; it is an outlook of people looking upward from below. It is what Nietzsche once called 'frog's perspective.' Oppression oppresses, and this is the consciousness of black men who have been oppressed for centuries,- oppressed so long that their oppression has become a tradition, in fact a kind of culture. (qtd. in Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* 160)

The centering of "vision" here conttinues from "double vision" which Wright characterizes as an African American 'visual' distinction. Wright's understanding of his own characters stands tall to Balthaser's claim of how the blacks in the former's fiction are intepellated in their own racial representation and how any attempt at resistance is shunned. Elsewhere, in *White Man Listen!* he begins a "direct descent into the psychological reactions of the people across whose lives the white shadow of the West has fallen. He uses Nietzsche to articulate the psychological distance that exists between the white/western world and the rest:

> "Frog Perspectives". This is a phrase I've borrowed from Nietzsche to describe someone looking from below upward, a sense of someone who feels himself lower than others. The concept of distance involved here is not physical; it is psychological. It involves a situation in which for moral or social reasons, a person or group feels that there is another person or group above it. Yet physically they live on the same general, material plane. A certain degree of hate combined with love (ambivalence) is always involved in this looking from below upward and the object against which the subject is measuring himself undergoes constant change. He loves the object because he would like to resemble it; he hates the object because his chances of resembling it are remote, slight. (Wright, *White* 6)

When Bigger is on the run from the law and the police, all hungry and wedged in narrow spaces, Wright endows him with a documentary gaze. This time it is Bigger who intrudes into black people's intimate spaces. The reader gets to see black lives through Bigger's eyes, especially of the claustrophobic spaces of African American households. In addition, the reader gets to see through what are stealthy eyes —a black man's eyes but stealthy eyes— the production and circulation of prejudice that plagues entire black communities even when a crime is committed by a single individual. Ironically, the

hideouts of a black fugitive are limited in scope, for Bigger and all the blacks had to live on their side of the "line", where they live bottled up like "wild animals" (Wright, *Native* 279). The point to note here is that Bigger's prying into the lives of the people during his escapades illuminates the 'hidden' realities, the unknown aspects of black living. Now Native Son foregrounds a black perspective on private lives, a black documentarian watching and speaking of a room with two beds:

> In one bed sat three naked black children looking across the room to the other bed on which lay a man and woman, both naked and black in the sunlight. There were quick, jerky movements on the bed where the man and woman lay, and the three children were watching. It was familiar; he had seen things like that when he was a little boy sleeping five in a room. Many mornings he had awaken and watched his father and mother. (279)

The nakedness and the blackness highlighted here refer to the deplorable living conditions of the blacks. The 'documentary gaze' highlights the lack of privacy and the 'public' nature of black sexuality and sexual lives. This particular aspect of 'black lives' is used and objectified by white documentarians. The documentary gaze next stumbles upon the conversation between random black individuals:

> Yuh see, tha' goddamn nigger Bigger Thomas made me lose mah job… He made the white folks think we's *all* jus' like him! (282)

There is a sense of the entire community being made to feel the repercussions of one black individual's crime. The 'line' that Wright refers to in these documenting ventures of Bigger's escapades accentuate the "frog perspective" mentioned earlier. The blacks and whites live on the same plane, the same country, yet the 'line' separates them and one group (the blacks) is irrevocably placed below the other. From this position, one can only aspire to, but never reach, for the differences are only more pronounced with time. In the beginning pages of the novel, Bigger looks longingly at an airplane and the opportunity that he could not avail, with always some "white boy" who "get a chance to do everything" flying it (46). The "frog perspective", of looking upward at the ever-changing world receives a new meaning here when a black boy looks up and measures his chances of ever flying an airplane, only to dismiss it as a stupid thought.

Interestingly, Balthaser links this event to the documentary gaze and Bigger's "contradictory role as a character" but even more importantly situates him "at a nexus of modernity and exclusion, political possibility and repression, signifying both the subject and object of documentary photograph" (369). The point is that the black man's position as a documentarian dovetails with his positioning of himself as subject and object. The moment of modernity is one therefore with the moment of the photograph. In fact, Bigger's character and the contradictions within him coincide with Wright's own contradictory feelings about documentary photography and modernity.

When Wright selects his images for *12 Million*, he is not just subscribing to the "aesthetic consumerism" (Sontag 25) that enhances experience and confirms reality. He is turning the documentary gaze to the streets and escapades of Bigger's narrative. As Sontag emphasizes, the poverty, struggle and deprivation that a people is exposed to garner the response it is supposed to elicit when one is familiar with the images one is exposed to:

> The quality of feeling, including moral outrage, that people can muster in response to photographs of the oppressed, the exploited, the starving, and the massacred also depends on the degree of their familiarity with these images. (Sontag 21)

Wright caters to a readership in which half of their brothers and sisters had to undergo the trials of race and time imposed on them by their own countrymen. The documentary impulse to cross barriers reinforces as much as it tries to overthrow the barriers. Wright therefore uses the first-person plural as the narrative voice to record the Great Migration and its subsequent effects, not to force a uniformity or homogeneity but for Wright's belief that "the ability to document a people's experience must grow organically from being a part of that people's history" (Balthaser 383).

The selection of Bigger to document black lives can be premised on this same hypothesis. Bigger himself has grown up in those households, waking up to the sight of rats and the 'nakedness' and 'blackness' of his family as a child. Wight furthers the documentary and modernity impulse to what Paula Rabinowitz says, "translate the present into the future" (qtd. in Balthaser 358). This contributes to making an eventful period in history relevant to not just records but to making it as a viable medium to see the African American passage to western modernity, fraught with impediments of a

racial discourse. This impulse then prevents and redeems the Benjaminian "wreckage of history" (358). The documentary can be seen as "crossroads" that mark Wright's (and the black person's) passage to modernity. It is also a mark of "crossing the line you dared us to cross" and paying in "the coin of death"; of "the new tide" and "new procession" (Wright, *12 Million* 147). If one finds signs of Wright's mixed feelings and contradictions: "living past living in the present" (146), one cannot ignore what the moment implies.

In selecting the photographs too, these contradictions and juxtapositions reflect in 'montages', a mode of documentary photography that places contradictory images either suggestively or in the sense of a disequilibrium. In Wright, it stays true to this spirit, while also including an "intense telescoping of historical contradiction" (Balthaser 376). Hence, 'modern' streets claim children; from the kitchenette, womenfolk move to the white people's kitchen (Fig. 9); from a judge administering justice, the image moves to a lynching (Fig. 10); from a battle with the police (Fig. 11), the image moves to revelry, breaking out in dance and music (Fig. 12). Wright, in experimenting with this medium goes beyond just that to claiming a project in modernity that traces the journey and subsequent transformation of African Americans from the cotton fields of the South to the industrial acumen in the North. In these montages, that thrive on multiplicity of meanings in reference to a single period in history, Wright records a moment/s and "its many possible receptions, and in this way, it is always of pasts, and presents and futures" (Smith 5). In short, for the reader of the present, Wright deploys the photographic medium to highlight that racial justice, just like modernity, is an unfinished project.

Wright attributes the uniqueness of his position to what Gilroy calls a "split subjectivity" (Gilroy 162). The split is between being a product of western civilization as well as a racial identity conditioned by that very civilization. His "angle of vision" starts off from a western point of view, but one that clashes in many vital points with "the present, dominant outlook of the West". This in a way explains his reservations against western modernity and documentary photography. The universalistic claims of modernity crumble under the weight of a racial rubric which Wright is intent on dismantling, and in the process claim a definitive African American modernity and its unique documentary impulse. The poor and the downtrodden, in the stereotypical interpretation of the camera eye become objects that incite sympathy, pity, disgust, as the

case may be, but are hardly attributed any history or agency. In Wright, however, documentary modernity receives the 'double' appropriation of not just carrying the present into the future, but as a medium through which the focus shifts to the African Americans confronted with western modernity, albeit not on a straight line of progress as the Enlightenment model would have liked to believe.

In being subjected to such change therefore, the black subjects themselves become important agents through which one nation consolidates itself as a 'modern' power through various advancements that go along with it. In what could otherwise have been a bare statistical presentation, Wright incorporates photographs to showcase the dramatic transformation of African Americans that included shifts in both geography (from South to North) and modes of production. As Wallace and Smith mentions in the introduction to their book *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (2012):

> Photography not only revolutionized visual representation but made it available to those previously cut off from its more bourgeois expressions in painting and sculpture, and Americans of all stripes were swept by the democratizing promise of the new technology (3).

In tandem with the growing audience of photography and in keeping with Wright's own preoccupation with the ocular since the start of his career, *12 Million Black Voices* showcases his readiness to experiment and offer a thesis on documentary modernity. A visual reading, so as to say, "reading the pictures" (Willis 3) makes it possible to read the experiences of a nation's population. Their passage to and struggles with modernity bring to the fore the unknown history of a marginalized group of people.

The African American and her Cultural Symbol in Modernity

Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* charts the ways in which Wright's position on modernity and African Americans changed from his early days to his time in Europe. Wright famously detached any fix biological or social attributes from the African American and termed him "America's metaphor", corresponding to the institution of racial slavery (Gilroy 149). "America's metaphor" is a term which comes up in *White Man Listen!* However, *12 Million* predates this understanding of the African American in Wright:

> The word Negro, the term by which, orally or in print, we black folk in the United States are usually designated, is not really a name at all nor a description, but a psychological island whose objective form is the most unanimous fiat in all American history; a fiat buttressed by popular and national tradition, and written down in many state and city statutes; a fiat which artificially and arbitrarily defines, regulates and limits in scope of meaning the vital contours of our lives, and the lives of our children and our children's children. (Wright 30)

In bestowing on the term "Negro" the qualifiers like 'fiat' and 'psychological, ' Wright extends the determiners of the term and the consequent prejudices associated with it to a conditioning. Seen this way, the life of this group thus determined is both arbitrary and limiting. In Wright's later years, especially after his time in Europe, he extends the term Negro to "a cultural symbol in the psychological, cultural and political systems of the West as a whole" (159). This symbol extends globally and is the marker of a western sensibility which thrives on colonialism, vis-à-vis Europe and its empires. In fact, the metaphor of the Negro extends to the condition of the oppressed across the globe. Particularly striking is his letter to Jawaharlal Nehru in 1950 in which his modernity defined by racial solidarity and anti-imperialist attitude is visibly stated:

> The changing physical structure of the world as well as the historical development of modern society demand that the peoples of the world become aware of their common identity and interests. The situation of oppressed people the world over is universally the same and their solidarity is essential, not only in opposing oppression but also in fighting for human progress. (qtd. in Gilroy 148)

Progress, undeniably one of the cherished ideals of modernity, is placed within the locus of the oppressed to be measured. The term Negro is extended beyond national boundaries and race, which modernity attempts to do away with to stand tall to the claims of an egalitarian society receive in Wright a new understanding. It is necessary to see that the transformation of an African identity into "Negro" is central to any understanding of western sensibility. As Gilroy suggests, this "transmutation" is especially important to an understanding of the "primitive, irrational and mystical elements in European culture that Wright would seek to explore in Pagan Spain, his study of Franco and Spanish fascism" (Gilroy 159-160). Wright's thesis on modernity is predicated on western ideals but challenges its basic foundations It is through this very

training then that he attempts to critique the various distinctions and impositions which the western module of modernity initially seeks to do away with.

Conclusion

As examined above, in experimenting with various genres, Richard Wright redefines African American writing. While contemporary ventures into writing grappled with concerns of authenticity and readership as well as prefaces alike, Wright draws from his experiences of growing up in the South and then attempts to extend it to an understanding of both the self and global cultural flows. In being always defined by the other, Wright becomes a voice and gaze which speaks from within the community. That alone renders a legitimacy with his choice of exposing the sordid realities of the American nation, with no one spared. If modernity attempts to do away with racial distinctions, it cannot be obviated that Wright's scathing attack is launched at blacks and whites alike. While Du Bois had high hopes from the African Americans, Wright's modernity is more a statement of contemporary facts. He enquires into a problem, and rightly protests, but hardly offers a remedy. If his work is criticized as reinforcing stereotypes associated with African Americans, it is with regard to his mostly widely read novels. In his own contradictions regarding his feelings towards modernity is he most a product of it, for modernity dwells in such contradictions. His ambivalences are directed both at what modernity entails as well as the projects (in writing) that it gives shape to. In either way, he does not reconcile these. In fact, building upon these, he proposes a thesis of modernity that is premised on the centrality of 'vision'. Rather than granting to race the centrality of his thesis, he situates 'experiences' which extend to the situation of the oppressed in a world where the whites have cast their shadow in the form of colonialism and empire. It would not be wrong to conclude that Wright's modernity expands the scope of experimentation as well as interpellates realities beyond fixed geographies and entities.