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Unmooring and Anchoring Bigger Thomas:

Ontological Confusion and Mercy in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Davey Cox

As Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* comes to its courtroom conclusion, Bigger Thomas becomes disoriented after an interview with Max, his lawyer, and begins to wonder for the first time about how other people feel. As he contemplates his imminent death, he thinks that "he would not mind dying now if he could only find out what this meant, what he was in relation to all the others that lived, and the earth upon which he stood" (363). Ontological confusion, regarding that which exists and all of his relations to reality, grips him, and he begins to think that he will die suspended in uncertainty. Only then does he abandon his previous fatalism and experience an intense desire to live, to find out "what he was in relation to all the others that lived." The oppression Bigger experiences throughout the novel unmoors him from reality by denying him the right to understand his relations to it—not to places, not to people, not to nonhumans, not even to ideas—except as the whites in charge deem appropriate. Bigger is, as Max describes in his courtroom speech, like a tree "ripped from its native soil" (399). His participation in the

ecosystem, broadly defined as a network of relations including human beings, nature, artificial constructions, and social and political forces, is cripplingly uncertain. Bigger's attempts to determine his place among all these things constitute the story's central struggle, and the degree to which he is or is not successful is a comment on the ecological consciousness of America.

Much of the scholarly discourse on Bigger's sense of alienation has focused on him as an individual, concluding that the conflict of the novel is his attempting to stitch together a coherent version of his own self (De Arman 87; Tremaine 104). In doing so, they either willfully discard the existing environment as an important factor in producing or defining the self, or simply conclude that Bigger's self ultimately exists in isolation from the world and everyone and everything in it. The novel, for such critics, takes on a solipsistic, expressionist flavor. Abdul JanMohamed goes so far as to argue that the novel must be read as a dream (77). This angle may be useful in making sense of some of the novel's unlikely circumstances and unusual happenings, but only addresses Bigger's question of "what he was," leaving "all the others that lived, and the earth upon which he stood" out of the equation (363). Such critics would argue that the novel does not say much about anyone or anything but Bigger. Scott Hicks, however, reminds us that reading texts such as *Native Son* ecocritically, focusing on relationships between humans and their environments, can help radically reimagine the way that humans fit into the world, and thus assist in solving problems of gender, racial, and economic inequality (218). By considering Bigger's relations to others and to the earth, we are opening ourselves to revelations about ontology, which informs ecology and environmental justice.

When whites restrict the spatial and behavioral aspects of black lives, the impact is both environmental and ontological, and ultimately relevant to the contemporary movement in environmental justice. The oppression-born environment in *Native Son* is the South Side, a moldering, unhealthy ghetto, and the resulting ontology is one in which blacks are isolated from the rest of reality—a system to which black and white characters alike subscribe. It is this failure to create a schema, or way of organizing experience, which integrates blacks into reality that creates Bigger's ontological confusion and blocks its resolution. It is this failure that pushes Bigger to violence as a way of getting a grip on the world, and that produces the excessively outraged response to Bigger's crime. Revising a worldview is a formidable task, but one of the solutions that the novel suggests is a type of genuine mercy. Mercy, in this case, means intimate closeness and sincere connection, which results in traction

on reality, the beginnings of new ways of understanding ontology, and new hope for environmental justice. Though it predates both the environmental and Civil Rights movements, *Native Son* blurs the lines between nature and culture as well as the division between environmental degradation and racial oppression, something the environmental justice movement, which focuses on the right to a healthy environment and protests discrimination that results in racial minorities living in areas with degraded environments, began doing in the 1980s. Thinking about human beings and the environment separately is not productive in the context of environmental justice because oppression is both environmental and racial, and inequality has to do with relations among humans as well as between humans and nonhumans and within ecosystems that people do not directly participate. Thus, *Native Son* can be read through the lens of environmental justice and, in turn, reveal the cultural roots of and possible solutions to the problems that the environmental justice movement seeks to address.

Bigger's ontological confusion is by nature unclear and ultimately comes down to his inability to construct a coherent schema of practice or, in other words, to imagine his world. The height of Bigger's confusion comes at a moment when he feels unable to identify anyone or anything in the world around him—when he discovers that he can't tell “what he was in relation to all the others that lived, and the earth upon which he stood” (363). “What he was” and “in relation” are the two key phrases here. The doubt regards identity and relation, the two components of schemas of practice, that are anthropologist Phillipe Descola's way of locating the source of ontology in some kind of mental equipment that, at the very least, all human beings have (112). Identification is the immediate act of comparison and contrast that an entity performs when confronted with something other than itself; most particularly, this involves determining whether an Other's interiority, or all that makes up its mind and soul, and physicality, or all its extrinsic properties, are like or unlike one's own, and relations consist of “external links between beings and things that are detectable in typical behavior patterns and may be partially translatable into concrete social norms” (113). These schemas let individuals order the world of their experience quickly and behave regularly. Bigger, however, is unable to adapt his behavior outside a narrow set of situations, pointing to some fault in his schema of practice that prevents him from understanding his environment and its constituents. His world makes no ontological sense, and cannot,

therefore, effectively be a world. Reflecting upon his participation in an ecosystem is, under such conditions, totally impossible.

A schema of practice is meant to enable human beings within a cultural group to behave consistently and reasonably in a wide variety of circumstances and should enable creativity in new contexts, but the schema constructed and adopted by the society represented in *Native Son* only provides that privilege to a limited, white subsection of the population. The rest, African Americans in particular, have the possibilities for identification and relation restrictively prescribed for them. White dominion is a naturalized state of affairs in the novel, most explicitly stated as such in the reflection that “white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force” (Wright 114). The general mode of identification in modern Western thought is defined by Descola as “naturalism,” where all things are made of the same kinds of physical matter, subject to the same natural laws, but where human beings are special in that they have an interiority, or mind/soul (174). In essence, this is the nature-culture divide. Every character in the novel has this schema available to them, but interiority is apparently denied along racial lines. Bigger does not view whites as people, but as a “natural force,” allying them with universal laws, denying them any kind of mind or soul. This sets him up for problems later when he is expected to deal directly with white people, and warps his sense of himself as an agent.

Racism, of course, cuts the other way as well, where animalized African Americans can also be denied this human interiority by white people. One of the problems with naturalism, Descola points out, is that certain states of affairs can be classified as “natural,” and therefore not open to argument (199). The natural force of whites is indisputable and oppressive enough to make Bigger exclaim: “They don’t let us do *nothing*” (19). This restriction of action may, from the white point of view, be its own justification, as it lends itself to the idea that blacks are not, in fact, agents capable of moral decision making, and may therefore be precluded from any moral consideration, a view that Émilie Hache and Bruno Latour explore when they write: “The paucity of scruples in a given text seems bound up with the paucity of actors on the surface of its argument” (315). To a certain sensibility, only those beings capable of intentional decision making are worthy of ethical consideration; all other entities, not having the ability to act consciously, may be treated with a “paucity of scruples,” or without moral consideration. If the whites in power believe that blacks do not truly have an interiority like theirs, thereby relegating them to a status other than human, then inequality is only natural. Explicit racist rhetoric is justified by same logic

that excuses violence to animals and ecosystems, because that which has no mind is fair game for exploitation. Naturalism with a racist twist oppresses Bigger, but the problems with the schema are even greater than this.

One of the difficulties of racism rooted in a particular schema of practice is its ability to persist even when the racism is no longer overt. This is how the Daltons can participate in oppressing Bigger even when their explicit emotions and intentions are charitable. This is one of the reasons why when Max questions Mr. Dalton about his potential complicity in producing the circumstances that made Bigger, the capitalist and philanthropist is confused by the possibility of having done anything but mitigate the unfortunate situations of African Americans. To Max's question about why properties on the South Side are rented to blacks, Mr. Dalton is flustered and responds: "Well. . . . Er. . . . I—I—I don't think they'd like to live any other place" (327). His hesitance to answer is either evidence of surprise at having his secret malice found out or of lack of awareness of having done anything wrong. We have no particular reason to suspect Mr. Dalton of being a closet white supremacist, but the invisible mechanisms of his ignorance require some explication. Descola argues that the psychological equipment necessary to identify and relate to an Other is somewhere "upstream" from the categorization of things and articulation of relations that is done consciously (96). This means that whatever the sentiments Mr. Dalton verbally espouses or however many ping-pong tables he donates, the chances are good that the schema of practice he has inherited from generations of white rule governs the way he ultimately treats African Americans. This also explains why he has such difficulty articulating his reasons for discriminatory behavior. Responsibility for racial oppression is hard to pin on anyone, especially those, like the Daltons, who see themselves as working to heal the rift in equality, because schemas of practice can hide behind the scenes.

Although the Daltons attempt to mitigate inequality, the primary mode of oppression in the novel is one in which they are complicit: the spatial isolation of the ghetto. As Bigger prowls the streets of the South Side, searching for an empty flat in which to hide from the army of police and vigilantes hunting for him, he reflects on the nature of confinement to a certain geographical area: "They keep us bottled up in here like wild animals, he thought. He knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the 'line'" (249). The particular kind of "bottling up" that Bigger refers to occurs because of long-standing institutional policies, the arbitrariness of which is signaled by quotes around the word "line." The policies that

produce the line constitute a kind of passive “policing” of the border between the ghetto and the other parts of the city, which creates the effect of an internal colony, over which white authorities have full control (Bennett 170). Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright have called such policies apartheid, arguing that the resulting “limited mobility, reduced housing options, inadequate residential packages, and decreased environmental choices” are matters of environmental justice (166). At this particular moment in the text the policing has become active and literal, with an army of eight thousand white men sent to close off all possible exits from the South Side, but this is merely a dramatization of the constant historical restriction on black mobility (Wright 245). The only importance that African Americans have is how they exist in relation to their white neighbors. As such, all other possible relations can be written off as unimportant, and residents of the Black Belt can be considered to exist in complete seclusion from anything else in the world. Their environment, education, and economic aspirations can be disregarded; even relations among black people are insignificant. The legitimation of such disregard is the message of residential segregation.

White Chicagoans may implicitly believe that blacks are alone in space, but even worse is that many blacks, in various ways, also buy into the white concept of the world. The white stranglehold on space results in a “cramped environment” that leads Bigger, in times of desperation, to “[close] his eyes and [strike] out blindly, hitting what or whom he could, not looking or caring what or who hit back” (240). By refusing to look around himself, Bigger relegates himself to an isolation that is ontological as well as spatial, suspended in an existential void. Wright refers to Bigger’s place as a No-Man’s Land, which is a useful way of thinking about being caught outside of a coherent world (451). Very few forms of relation are allowed for in Chicago, and the resulting place is not one that gives Bigger any purchase on reality, such that we might say that Bigger’s No-Man’s Land imbues him with a sense of what Desmond Harding calls “placelessness” (370). Not everyone on the South Side lives with such existential angst; coping in the No-Man’s Land can be done, but only by somehow ignoring the world. Bigger scorns such escapism, realizing that though it takes many forms, its effects are the same: “What his mother had was Bessie’s whiskey, and Bessie’s whiskey was his mother’s religion” (240). Whiskey deadens Bessie’s sense of reality, permitting her to carry on from day to day, and religion relieves Bigger’s mother through metaphysical assurances of salvation. These recourses are available to them because they fit squarely within the white schema of

practice that places blacks somewhere outside of reality. James Baldwin writes that Bigger's acceptance of white "theology" is the tragedy and failure of *Native Son*, but Bigger is certainly not the only character who has fallen victim to white cultural hegemony. Thus, not only do the whites perceive a severely limited number of relationships with black people, but black people are only capable, due to their isolation, of experiencing a small variety of relationships.

Even if most of the characters share a dysfunctional worldview, the text supports the idea of a wider ecological reality, one in which there are more entities and relations than anyone imagines. Aside from the Daltons' house cat, the only animal to make a significant appearance in the text is the rat from the opening scene. The rat's intrusion into the Thomas family's domestic space produces terror in Vera and Bigger's mother and provokes reckless brutality in Bigger (4-7). The most notable function of this scene might be to foreshadow Bigger's fate. The rat *is* black, after all, "[pulses] with fear," and has its space restricted in order to enable Bigger and Buddy to find and kill it (6). More importantly, however, it shows that people, especially black people, are not alone. The rat is an eruption of the city's ecosystem into the lives of the same city's most isolated inhabitants. Rats are a part of the urban landscape that most affects the poor, since the wealthy have the means to shut out such undesirable elements of the environment, much as they can shut out African Americans (Bullard and Wright 170). The encounter with the rat is not enough to shake Bigger into a realization of his place in the world, a phenomenon that will be repeated when Bigger intrudes violently into the white world. Killing the rat with impunity, in fact, enhances Bigger's instability, since, as Christine Gerhardt argues, it places him "at the margins *and* the center of two overlapping systems of power (i.e., racism and ecological exploitation)" (520). The rat is an early suggestion of reality beyond No-Man's Land.

What the rat begins to imply is further developed in the way that characters, both black and white, use ecological metaphors to describe each other and the city, demonstrating their unawareness of any sort of wider ecosystem. The most important of these metaphors is that of the jungle. At various times, Chicago itself is compared to a jungle. During one such occasion, Bigger tries to convince Bessie that hiding in one of the abandoned buildings on the South Side will be safe and says, "It'll be like hiding in a jungle" (228). The reason why hiding in a jungle is safe is because of the multiplicity of organisms, the complex web of relations, and the chaos of entities acting and growing—never mind that the jungle is also treacherous for the same reasons. This deployment

of the term does not acknowledge relations and complexity so much as it points to Bigger's sense of anonymity. Rather than understanding the urban jungle as the home of other organisms, he recognizes only that its expansiveness makes him as an individual difficult to locate (perhaps, on a figurative level, even for himself). Later, in one of the many newspaper articles concerning Bigger's case, the journalism refers to Bigger as a "jungle beast" (279). This comparison has roots in the slave trade from Africa, where the association of blacks with wild nature began and has been repeatedly deployed to justify their oppression (Gerhardt 520). Aside from being twisted and bigoted, this metaphor also demonstrates the lack of "an intense consciousness of land," of which Aldo Leopold would write in 1948 (223). Whites think of blacks as existing in isolation, yet compare them to jungle beasts, members of one of the most complex biotic communities on the planet, betraying ignorance of what "jungle" truly means, perhaps thinking of it only as corresponding to savagery, mystery, and other abstractions.

Such distance between perception and reality creates a situation with a high potential for moments of radical re-imagination and re-worlding. As Bigger becomes aware of situations outside the purview of his schema of practice, beginning with his evening out with Mary and Jan, his behavior becomes erratic, violent, and self-destructive. Wright asserts that Chicago's jungle-like environment of endless potential creates such "a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South" (442). Ralph Ellison, similarly, writes: "For despite Jim Crow, Negro life does not exist in a vacuum, but in the seething vortex of those tensions generated by the most highly industrialized of western nations" (271). The confusion that begins with violence eventually settles into small revelations that shock Bigger into reconsidering the isolation he previously took as self-evident, but his discoveries, instead of resolving his perplexity, amplify it. One of these revelations occurs when Bigger's family confronts him before the inquest, when he realizes that actions, performed "on the assumption that he was alone," have hurt and affected his family, each member of which "was a part of him, not only in blood, but in spirit" (298). He begins in this moment to understand that he doesn't exist as a totally discrete entity, but that his identity is tied up in other people, the beginning of a sense of self that Catrin Gersdorf says consists of "who [one] is in relation to [his/her] environment" (30). Unfortunately for Bigger, this realization is not enough to anchor him. Even if he has successfully located himself in relation to a few people, he

lacks a wider context in which those relations make sense, and winds up cast even further adrift by the realization that things are not as he thought they were.

If Bigger's assumptions about his family are radically revised, then his notions about white people are even more greatly challenged, opening the way for the novel's resolution. At various times, Bigger conceptualizes white people as a mass, constituting a "white mountain looming behind him" (298). So ideated, white people can be dealt with not as individuals with whom some kind of unique relationship might be possible, but as representative of a great, impersonal mass with such inertia that the thought of moving it is simply absurd. This attitude is manifest in Bigger's inability to understand Jan and Mary and is certainly reinforced by the lynch mob surrounding the jail, but as a metaphor, the white mountain moves Bigger from the concrete, the real people around him, to the abstract, where no one is real. After talking with Max and expressing his feelings, he begins to entertain the alternative that the "white looming mountain" might not be "a mountain at all, but people, people like himself, and like Jan" (361). Significantly, Jan has moved into the realm of personhood, and possibility of personhood has opened up for each human constituent of the mountain that oppresses him. Once more, Bigger has no basis for evaluating these newfound individuals, nor for choosing appropriate relations with them, except the formerly utilized matrix of hate, so the confusion increases, but at least his deep-seated schema of practice is open for change.

At the same time as Bigger's suppositions about the world have been utterly shaken, the white citizens of Chicago, rather than being awoken to their inadequate worldview, hastily patch the hole, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of the ontological status quo. Bigger knows that by acting like any normal black boy, he can easily rule himself out of the suspect pool (113). White society doesn't have an automatic protocol to deal with the murder of a white woman by a black man, so Bigger believes himself to be safe from detection. When Bigger's crime is discovered, however, whites already have a number of ontological solutions to fall back on. The first and most important is rape. They know how to deal with rape, and their built-in schema for such a relation is evident when Buckley declares that, instead of murder, which would reflect true events, "the central crime here is *rape!*" (413, italics in original). The appropriate course of action with a black rapist is all too clear, but the fact remains that whites have been shocked. Thus as Buckley's italics and exclamation point indicate, a run of the mill rapist would be fit for little but deliverance to the lynch mob, but a murderer must have an example made of him. The precedent must be set that

black men cannot get away with murder, but that they will be dispatched with the same harshness as any sexual predator. Murder, which gives Bigger a sense of power, will not be privileged over baser crimes.

Having collapsed murder onto rape and solved one aspect of Bigger's world shaking, whites move on from relational solutions to employing new schemas of identification. Since it is inconceivable for a normal black boy to kill a white girl, Bigger must not be a normal black boy. This redefinition is manifest in the variety of nonhuman terms Buckley uses to refer to Bigger, from "half-human black ape" to "black mad dog" to "ghoul" (408, 409, 413). But dehumanization of African Americans is commonplace in racist discourse, and a murder trial certainly isn't necessary to justify the use of these debasing terms to a sufficiently prejudiced mind. More noteworthy may be the newspaper article in which the editor of the *Jackson Daily Star* writes that Bigger, "despite his dead-black complexion, may have a minor portion of white blood in his veins, a mixture which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature" (281). What makes this newspaper editor such an expert on Bigger Thomas is unclear. Resorting to his dubious authority indicates the widespread consternation at discovering that Bigger, who appeared to be one thing, has turned out to be another. A mild-mannered black man may not be capable of murder, but the product of miscegenation certainly might. The horror with which white people respond to Bigger has a touch of the uncanny to it—the familiar made unfamiliar, somewhere between self and Other. Bigger is thus recast into a new subset of black people, even more contemptible than the rest.

If white Chicagoans can ride out the traumatic events of the novel with little to no change in their ways of organizing experience, then we might ask what results in Bigger's liberation from his isolating assumptions, or, indeed, how anyone might overcome the reign of an oppressive ontological regime within. Because of shared cultural contexts, everyone's schemas of practice have the same roots and are likely just as entrenched in the unconscious workings of one mind as another. It would be easy to suppose that the different outcomes stem from their relative positions of power, where Bigger, oppressed and disenfranchised, is more amenable to changing his worldview because he has more to gain by doing so. This may be the case, but the mechanism of change still needs to be explicated. That mechanism is mercy, which first occurs, curiously, when Jan comes in on the black preacher's sermon on the mercy of Christ and says to Bigger: "And when I heard that you'd [killed Mary], I wanted to kill you. And then I got to thinking. I saw if I killed, this thing would go on and on and never

stop. I said, 'I'm going to help that guy, if he lets me'" (288). This is mercy in the traditional sense—forbearing from exact retribution even when it is apparently deserved. Jan refuses to give in to the rhetoric of inflexible justice, which would dictate that he had no choice but to make sure that Bigger died for his crime. He breaks the cycle and offers his friendship to a man who had done him a personal wrong, and in doing so, changes his fundamental way of understanding black people. Lip service to their basic humanity goes deeper when he has mercy, and the schema that leaves African Americans isolated is defeated.

Having mercy has certain benefits for the merciful one, but there are obvious advantages for the recipient of mercy as well. The effects of Jan's mercy on Bigger's concept of the world are immediate: "a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet. The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him" (289). Here, Bigger's abstract metaphor for white people begins to work its way back into reality, from a chip off the mountain of hate to a real human being, in three dimensions and full of complexity. The reference to Christ in the Book of John in the phrase "the word had become flesh" further emphasizes the mercy inherent in the act that made Jan appear as a human being. Perhaps the most important aspect of this moment of mercy is that, in order to receive it, Bigger must have mercy on Jan as well. Bigger would be justified in persisting embittered, in denying personhood to Jan just as all white people who made him feel uncomfortable in his black skin, but by so doing, he would be dooming himself to unchanging hate. This reciprocal mercy redeems Bigger ontologically, forging a new relationship with a new being that allows him to interpret the world in a new way. He has to wade across some confusion first, falling apart completely before he can put himself back together, but mercy helps him begin to heal.

The kind of mercy Jan has is, unfortunately, limited in scope because it requires a specific wrong to be done by one particular entity to another in order for it to have any occasion to become effective. It must be easy to draw lines of blame. Racism and environmental degradation, as well as other large systemic problems, do not work that way, which is part of what makes them so difficult to deal with (Jenkins 1). Max's mercy, though less clearly definable, may be a better example of the kind of flexible mercy adequate for large-scale, nebulous wrongs. After Max finishes his long speech, pleading for Bigger's life, Bigger is not so much concerned with the content of the speech, since he didn't understand it, nor whether or not it was successful, but sits "hugging the proud

thought that Max had made the speech all for him, to save his life” (406). The mercy inherent in Max’s act of trying to save Bigger’s life constitutes a type of mercy that, instead of sparing its object a deserved wrong, bestows undeserved blessings. Although Max cannot trace a direct line of obligation between himself and Bigger, he does his best to save Bigger’s life. The result is that Bigger feels a “hugging” kind of closeness to Max, even if they do not actually embrace, and has mercy in return.

Mercy is an admirable virtue, but not an easy one, because it demands such so much from its disciples, but this arduous nature is what makes mercy so effective in amending schemas of practice. Max, while he demonstrates an exemplary kind of mercy, also gives us an illustration of the deep discomfort that accompanies mercy. In the novel’s final scene, Bigger has finally healed to a point where he can make some sense of himself in relation to others, and as he haltingly explains himself, Max fills with terror and makes his exit, “keeping his face averted” (429). Critics have variously interpreted this gesture as a denial of Bigger’s right to self-determination, the ultimate failure either of the novel or of society (Baldwin 45, De Arman 87). But since Bigger has finally given up what Tremaine notes as “his instinct . . . to dissemble,” Max’s terror has more to do with the anxiety of intimacy than with rejection (92–93). True mercy requires anyone who exercises it to consider his or her relation to another in a radically new light; it demands openness, intimacy, and vulnerability, and Bigger, at least, has complied. If Max recoils, it is because this final interaction between Max and Bigger is an excellent example of Timothy Morton’s intimate encounters with the “strange stranger,” which “goad us to greater levels of consciousness, which means more stress, more disappointment, less gratification (though perhaps more satisfaction), and more bewilderment” (135). In other words, there is a price to pay, but the reward is communion with some small part of the universe, human or otherwise.

The awareness of relations with others that this communion generates is necessary to dethrone a dominant ontological imaginary that perpetuates racial oppression. The environmental justice movement’s platform demands both self-determination for oppressed peoples and acknowledgement of the “ecological unity and the interdependence of all species” (“Principles”). These goals map nicely onto the overlap between racial and environmental issues gestured to by Wright’s use of ecological metaphors. Although, addressing both areas of oppression is without its problems, since accommodating both the right to autonomy possessed by individuals and the complex network of

relationships in which each individual finds him or herself entangled is part of what makes matters of environmental degradation and racism into such “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber 160). It is often nearly impossible to say definitively when to privilege the claims of an individual over those of the larger collective, and the difficulty is only amplified when the collective is expanded to include nonhuman members, including inanimate objects like buildings and natural features. Despite the problems, however, environmental justice does well to expand “ethics to an ecological membership” (Jenkins 202). Nature and culture fold into one another and become indistinguishable. Quality of life for the human species is connected to the quality of life of other organisms and the health of ecosystems, and becoming aware of the ecological relations that tie all of us together is a vital part of understanding this. Effective action is greatly facilitated by this kind of knowledge about the world, knowledge accessible through acts of mercy.

In the face of systemic problems like environmental racism, relying on individuals to have mercy on one another may not be particularly promising as a means of achieving drastic changes in culture, but mercy as I have described it is at least one way of breaking deeply engrained patterns of oppression by becoming more aware of our ecological interdependence. Indeed, the mercy enacted between Max and Bigger is abortive and awkward, but results in Bigger’s curiosity about his place in the world, including among its nonhuman elements. True mercy is amenable to environmental justice because it is widely practicable and demands extreme openness and consciousness from all those involved. Individual acts of mercy may not be enough to enact change on a large scale, but *Native Son* demonstrates its potential. Cultivated as a civic virtue, mercy may be a feature of a better future—not just for human beings, but for the entire biotic community of the earth.

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