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**Fatal Eyeballing: Sex, Violence and
Intimate Voyeurism in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940)**

Woman, you're pinned up
On the wall in front of you.

The Raincoats, "Off Duty Trip" (1979)

The plots of US crime fictions often turn on the fate of the body of a woman who has suffered male violence. The resurfacing of a female corpse and the upsetting evidence it brings to light proves crucial to the conviction of the main criminal in James Ellroy's *Clandestine* (1982) and James Lee Burke's *Cimarron Rose* (1997), for example. Elsewhere, in William Faulkner's potboiler *Sanctuary* (1931) and Patricia Highsmith's *A Game for the Living* (1958), central female figures survive their ordeal, and go on to describe their physical degradation in the cause of prosecution. The bodies of most female victims, however, testify after death. The detection of their blood or the traces of their DNA remind the living that they were once the focus of an annihilating passion: that the sexual consumption of their bodies itself turned them into potential courtroom proof, and that this then led their attackers to try to hide or wipe them from view. Many US crime stories can still be charted by the appalling yet revealing descents undergone by the female bodies at their heart. Sources of desire and victims of violence, silenced objects that still sometimes voice and sometimes become damning evidence, these bodies are in every way central, and to track their transformations is often to retell nothing less than the story itself.

In the following essay I argue that, for *Native Son*'s first murder, Richard Wright turned out another example of this female disintegration yet did so in a way that drew attention to its basis in misogynistic fantasy. By the conclusion I want to suggest that in some important respects Wright's treatment of misogynistic crime anticipated the new priorities apparent in 1970s second wave feminism as well as the vibrant feminist artworks produced in that period.¹ His alertness to the pictorialization of women and to the creeping disembodiment of sex in everyday life in particular looks ahead to 1970s feminism's incipient concern with the erotic exploitation of women's bodies: to Laura Mulvey's seminal neologism scopophilia, for example, and to the distinctive view of sexual commodification that Luce Irigaray arrived at in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) among other major works. Itself mesmerised by misogynistic violence, *Native Son* nonetheless provides an early warning of what Hélène Cixous would later call the Western inclination to "confiscate" women's bodies: to detach them from their own functions, if not from biology itself, until they loom up again, plastic and depthless, as so many "uncanny stranger[s] on display."²

In performing this narrative work, Wright clearly fell back on some of his old influences, returning to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1865-6) as well as the Gothic tales of Edgar Allen Poe. In particular Michel Fabre has traced *Native Son*'s deliberate allusions to "The Black Cat" (1843), helping us to discern its debts to what may be the ugliest of all Poe's stories: how its first victim, too, no sooner suffers violence than she presents her aggressor with the problem of concealment, and how the latter's failure to solve this problem again consigns him, if not "to the hangman," then death by electrocution.³ Yet in what follows, I want to venture past the vicious drunkard of "The Black Cat," even past Raskolnikov, reaching beyond the long shadows both killers cast over *Native Son*.⁴ During Bigger's suffocation and disposal of Mary Dalton, after all, allusions to Poe become quite blatant—and so much so that they draw attention to the ways in which Wright has departed

from his vaunted source. In looming so large, the debt to Poe itself suggests a need to read *Native Son* against as well as in the Gothic grain. Especially it illuminates that, even while *Native Son* draws on “The Black Cat” in tracking Mary Dalton’s descent into incriminating evidence, it also slows her decomposition down, decelerating it, frame by frame, and opening it up to moral inspection. This appalling prolongation of Mary’s disposal *Native Son* then fills with other intertextual debts. Hard-boiled fiction and Henry James, femmes fatales and Hollywood close ups, all become more pertinent sources than the Gothic and Dostoevskian influences on which criticism has tended to dwell.

These other influences lead *Native Son* to the misogynistic impulses apparent in the US crime tradition. Breaking open the woman’s descent from ornament to incriminating corpse, Wright here requires us to watch what Bigger watches: to gaze upon the aftermath of his violence, and to connect this lingering look to the voyeuristic desires that the text and its protagonist alike directed toward Mary while she remained alive. What results, decades before Mulvey’s crucial 1970s writings, is a critique that finds in noir and Henry James a divergent response to a general heteronormative culture that has already circumscribed touch, casting straight men as spectators and separating women from their bodies so as to eliminate, seemingly, actual tactile pleasure. Arising here, in part thanks to influences on Wright not fully acknowledged in the scholarship, is an interest in what I call intimate voyeurism: a sense of only watching women, even of only seeing the world at hand as a deferred source of future pornographic pleasure, and of greeting any violation to this visual erotic paradigm as a trespass tantamount to violence.

It is unsurprising that Wright’s reconfigurations of established noir and crime conventions turn upon the fraught relationship the latter sustain between voyeurism and more reciprocal forms of sexual pleasure. The Jim Crow regime of his childhood harboured terrifying levels of paranoia about the black male gaze per se, and was prone to conflate

interracial eye contact with that crime of “reckless eyeballing” which could, in turn, become a pretext for what Angela Y. Davis called “the racist cry of rape.”⁵ Who you look at and why, who can and cannot look back: Mary’s long and excruciating suffocation brings *Native Son* up against new forms of old political questions, leading it to rebel against Jim Crow’s monopolisation of violence only to release misogynistic energies all its own. But Mary’s murder also remains a modern crime, metropolitan and mediatised, and this provides an early indication that, as he became a “global citizen,” moving into the heart of Pan-Africanism’s transnational world, Wright increasingly came to understand Jim Crow’s demonization of his own powers of sight not just in racial terms nor as a brutal historical throwback but as an extreme manifestation of an emergent sexual hegemony, a sign that all kinds of men were now regarding erotic pleasure as a kind of visual transaction and to act as if even their gentlest caresses could do harm.⁶ “You are nothing because you are black, and proof of your *being nothing is that if you touch a white woman, you’ll be killed!*”: the brutal logic of the lynching that Wright laid bare in *The Long Dream* (1958) finds echoes not only in all his other excoriations of Jim Crow but also as Erskine Fowler, the white protagonist of *Savage Holiday* (1954), watches his potential lover “like a hawk” and cannot touch her without thinking of a “dead, broken doll,” before brutally stabbing her to death.⁷ Throughout Wright’s oeuvre, and not least when it inhabits Fowler’s pristinely modern Upper West Side apartment, tender touches erupt into violent acts of disfiguration.

The effect of these juxtapositions is to present Jim Crow’s demonization of the black male look as an extreme projection of a belief in the latent violence of the heterosexual gaze that Wright came to identify with the bourgeois or Puritanical West. Beneath the absurdities of “reckless eyeballing” lay a sort of fatal mistranslation of sexual vision and violence that Wright at length found reminiscent of the optics of sexual frustration he detected in noir narrative and even amidst the lobbies and lounges of James’s cosmopolitan European hotels.

Effectively, in the first and far more aestheticized of Native Son's murders, Wright harnessed his memories of the intimidations of "reckless eyeballing" to a violent fantasy of intimate voyeurism, and in order to produce this new kind of fantasy he drew upon sources which Native Son's leading critics have not fully recognized. Literary negotiations quite invisible in their work lie behind the impression that Bigger destroys Mary Dalton's body, in effect, by looking at it.

Living Images

The first woman we meet in Native Son outside of Bigger's immediate family takes the form of a cinema image. Two dimensional and larger than life, *The Gay Woman's* star drifts between "scenes of cocktail drinking, dancing, golfing, swimming, and spinning roulette wheels" while Bigger and his associate Jack, in the darkened theatre, look on.⁸ As the film progresses it becomes obvious that this glowing white shadow figure is a harbinger of Mary Dalton. She too is a millionaire; she too has a Communist lover. On seeing her face onscreen, Bigger even wonders whether his new employers, with whom he is about to start working as a servant and chauffeur, might have "a daughter who was a hot kind of girl," and who might "like to come to the South Side and see the sights" (64).

These omens are far from subtle. They clearly prime the narrative for Bigger's looming movement through a world of smooth opulent modernity that remains reliant on its economic exploitation of the ghetto abutting its southern edge. Beyond its narrative groundwork, however, the cinema scene also carries out a set of symbolic functions. Here Wright is rehearsing the climax of Native Son's first section, preparing to introduce Mary as if she too were insubstantial, less flesh than picture, and someone at whom Bigger will want to stare wantonly and without fear of being seen. Insofar as she resembles *The Gay Woman's*

eponymous hero, Mary seems another living image, “a doll in a show window,” who is not quite present even when she is standing right in front of her soon-to-become killer (94).

By such devices *Native Son* encourages us to accept the rearview mirror through which Bigger first really gets to stare at Mary as if it were a miniature replica of the vast cinema screen on which he earlier watched the matinee idol and (in Wright’s first, unexpurgated version of the scene) masturbated.⁹ The longer he dwells on her “black eyes, white face, red lips,” the more Bigger looks at Mary as if she were the subject of one of those close ups on which, as Mulvey has recently argued, Hollywood became increasingly reliant throughout the 1930s.¹⁰ Without quite harbouring no “reality except that of its own perfection,” as Roland Barthes said of Garbo on celluloid, Mary does seem caught, intermittently, as if held captive inside the rearview.¹¹ It soon becomes clear that Bigger would prefer she stopped trying to talk to him; her conversational overtures clearly prevent him from losing himself in her unseeing and almost grayscale face.

As they head into the South Side, however, this becomes an increasingly awkward desire—and although he had previously daydreamed about such a journey, Bigger becomes its increasingly anxious pilot. His knowledge that Mary and Jan have made him an accomplice to their racial voyeurism is a clear source of his concern. But he also becomes fearful because he knows that whenever he looks into the rearview, creeping up on Mary’s face, his own body becomes that bit more problematic, obstructing its own desires. Indeed, although Sondra Guttman notes that after “Mary moves into the front seat,... Bigger urgently feels his own physicality,” this response is less a discovery than a confirmation: it only exacerbates his existing knowledge that he had never before “been so close to a white woman” (99).¹² By propelling herself into the front seat, Mary might breach “racial gender etiquette,” as Rashad Shabazz suggests.¹³ But she also punctures a sexual fantasy beyond Jim Crow, preventing Bigger from spying on her or finding in her face some source of unseeing

or autoerotic pleasure. Her autonomous movements, her speech, and her bodily control all pointedly thwart him in his own voyeuristic enterprises. As long as she remains sober, she will not let him watch her as if she were just another close up; she will continue to demonstrate her capacity to look back.¹⁴

Long before Mary's suffocation, then, *Native Son* problematizes touch. The voyeuristic odyssey that carries Bigger from the cinema into the heart of Mary's bedroom allows *Native Son* to paint in full a culture at once pornographic and puritanical: a world where straight male voyeurism seems normal, lechery de rigueur, yet even the gentlest touch spells crisis. *Native Son*'s initial murder brings to its logical conclusion a traumatic transformation that began when Bigger first intruded upon Mary's ethereal cinematic world:

He felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people.... He stood, holding her in his arms, fearful, in doubt. His eyes were growing used to the darkness and a little light seeped into the room from the winter sky through a window. At the far end of the room he made out the shadowy form of a white bed....

"Here, wake up, now."

He tried to stand her on her feet and found her weak as jelly. He held her in his arms again, listening in the darkness. His senses reeled from the scent of her hair and skin. She was much smaller than Bessie, his girl, but much softer. Her face was buried in his shoulder; his arms tightened about her. Her face turned slowly and he held his face still, waiting for her face to come round, in front of his. Then her head leaned backward, slowly, gently; it was as though she had given up. Her lips, faintly moist in the hazy blue light, were parted and he saw the furtive glints of her white teeth. Her eyes were closed. He stared at her dim face, the forehead capped with curly black hair. He eased his hand, the fingers spread wider, up the center of her back and her face came toward him and her lips touched his, like something he had imagined (115-6).

His life determined, always at the mercy of events, Bigger is here plunged into a stark Manichean cosmology that already names him its intruder—a stranger, in the language of James Baldwin, "beyond the disciplines of salvation."¹⁵ The untouchable promise of Mary's cinematic bedroom, its "hazy" light and her elusive whiteness, her magical ability to remain

soft even when he holds her tight, all suggest that Bigger cannot quite inhabit this uncanny space. But this fantasy, in which Bigger's social invisibility as a subaltern morphs weirdly into an opportunity for voyeuristic gratification, remains threatened by any consciousness Mary can still muster. Her dollish features might already anticipate the "negative definition of the body" that Jean Baudrillard identified in the rise of postmodern culture, making her appear "a smooth" and "faultless... object."¹⁶ But this plasticizing fantasy remains fraught, liable to be shattered by her slurred yet still sensate voice. Bigger's separation from the scene continues just so long as she remains silent.

Even after Mary mumbles a command, ordering her servant to help her as her drunkenness deepens, her subsequent silence seems to restore Bigger to his odd but beautiful stage. Afterwards he acts as if he were indeed screened off from the world through which he moves. As his skin carries along with it the shadows behind the door, their mutual darkness merging, the former acquires some of the intangibility of the latter. A sense of bodily detachment results. Over Mary Bigger now seems to float, weightless and voyeuristic, the impressionistic scene draining him of physical presence. This, together with the simple fact that Mary is paralytic, in turn lets him eyeball her—and he does so, no longer recklessly, no longer against a Jim Crow taboo, but as if availing himself of a new, more criminal, freedom. Even his constant fear of capture seems for a while forgotten.

A similar disembodiment, however, affects Mary too. Her body "weak as jelly," her skin here comes to recall the white sheets that envelop it. Reviving *Native Son's* initial cinematic tropes, these associations again offer the female figure up as a living image, less real than picture, her beauty appearing, even amidst its defilement, beyond touch. But this is to say that Mary here becomes fetishized somehow, defined by what Luce Irigaray called woman's "measurement" against a value that is "external to her,... an envelope that is precious but impenetrable, ungraspable."¹⁷ Ever elusive, incarnated in a virginity myth her

own voice unsettles, Mary's allure remains tantalising throughout this passage, ensuring that, even as Bigger, emboldened, gropes her breasts, he remains outside the intimacy he inhabits, aroused less to penetrative rape than yet more masturbation. Indeed, if anything, as her "fingernails" dig "into his wrists," Mary seems likelier to pierce her attacker's skin than vice versa (117). The logic of this odd numb scene, in turn, places into Bigger's hands the softest of all conceivable murder weapons:

Frenzy dominated him. He held his hand over her mouth and his head was cocked at an angle that enabled him to see Mary and Mrs Dalton by merely shifting his eyes. Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her mumbling, or he would be caught. Mrs Dalton was moving slowly toward him and he grew tight and full, as though about to explode. Mary's fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him. His eyes were filled with the white blur moving toward him in the shadows of the room. Again Mary's body heaved and he held the pillow in a grip that took all of his strength.... The white blur was still.... Then suddenly her fingernails did not bite into his wrists. Mary's fingers loosened. He did not feel her surging and heaving against him. Her body was still (117).

On a literal, even legal, level, this murder is in no way inadvertent. The smothering is purposeful, and meant to kill, and *Native Son* throughout remains at pains to emphasise the physical force that Bigger is bringing to the task.¹⁸ At another level, however, the suspicion persists that the murder is in some way unintentional. Nor is this simply in the sense that (under the racist paranoia that still held sway in many of the courtrooms of 1930s Chicago) Bigger's presence in Mary's bedroom alone indicates his guilt (142).¹⁹ Even after he acts, an insinuation of mutual erotic pleasure unsettles the brutal fact of Mary's molestation. As she "heave[s]" and "surge[s] upward," her "fingernails" scratching into Bigger's skin, her body's resistance mimics sexual passion of a clichéd, even pornographic, sort. Upon her suffocation, moreover, her body's "long sigh" and the loosening of her fingernails prolong this erotic

subtext and suggest the murder has brought her relief. Death here somehow leaves Mary intact, framed by the bed's white screen, an object of beauty at last restored to cinematic immobility. Bigger seems liberated, relieved of the fear that Mary will catch him staring at her, at liberty to search for what Mulvey calls the "secret" behind the "surface" or "topography" of feminine beauty.²⁰ Still haunted by the knowledge that she will now decay, he gorges on the sight of her, indulging a fantasy of intimate voyeurism he first desired when spying her through her car's rearview mirror.

By these means *Native Son* pictures a crime scene radically unlike that of its second murder. Soon enough Bigger will go about Bessie's face with a brick, turning it into a "wet wad," a "sodden mass," her degradation a proof of his monstrosity (267). The clean and immaculate state in which Bigger first leaves Mary and her bedroom could not be more different. Mary's killing, if not really accidental, can seem secondary: a side effect of Bigger's overwhelming desire to return her to the cinematic realm. Her death can seem ordained by his hope of watching her without her seeing—of sinking anew, as if back into *The Gay Woman's* autoerotic theatre, amidst the darkness round her bed.

Images of softness envelop *Native Son's* first murder. At a moral level brutal and obscene, at an aesthetic level Bigger's violence works not to destroy the murder scene but to preserve it as if in aspic. In this respect, the novel departs radically from its acknowledged sources. As he continued writing *Native Son*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* weighed heavily on Wright's mind, and Raskolnikov's interior voice, as it wheels from self-mitigation to self-doubt, finds many echoes in Bigger's stunted monologues. But these similarities only make more apparent that, whereas Bigger smoothly and bloodlessly executes Mary, Raskolnikov murders his first victim with an axe, spattering "a great deal of blood" across her fetid St. Petersburg apartment.²¹ The same weapon gets covered with blood in "The Black Cat." As he awaits his execution, Poe's narrator recalls that, after his wife

stopped him attacking their cat yet again, he had felt “Goaded” and, overtaken by “a rage more than demoniacal,” had “buried the axe in her brain.”²² *Native Son* thus defers its debts to Poe and Dostoevsky just so long as Bigger continues to press his hands through the pillow and into Mary’s throat. In a novel alert to the ugliness of violence—a novel that hurls “more than demoniacal” energies of its own against its black female victim—no breaking of the skin is permitted in its first fatal struggle. Not even the smallest bruise is allowed to harm Mary’s frozen and again porcelain face.

Only in the immediate aftermath of this murder does the novel express its debts to Poe and Dostoevsky. Deferred long enough for Bigger to gaze upon Mary’s at first drunken and then victimised body, allusions to “*The Black Cat*” and *Crime and Punishment* again flood *Native Son* following the interval after her last breath. As we have seen, in a frightening interlude, death allows a total indulgence of intimate voyeurism: text and protagonist alike eyeball Mary shamelessly and with relief, safe in the knowledge that she cannot look back. But new pressures—Bigger’s fear of being caught by the police; everyone’s fear of what is about to happen to Mary’s body—soon destroy this fantasy. As if blaming the corpse for being dead, furious he cannot forestall Mary’s decay, Bigger abruptly accelerates her descent, his earlier voyeurism, in Mulvey’s words, finding “its narrative associate in sadism.”²³ From the Daltons’ kitchen Bigger finds a blunt saw, a weapon redolent of Poe and Dostoevsky’s makeshift blades, and launches an appalling attack on Mary’s already-dead “flesh,” cutting at her neck until her “head hung limply, ... the curly black hair dragging about in blood” (123-4).

Other debts to “*The Black Cat*” now engulf *Native Son*. In a novel full of signifying reversals—a novel whose overwhelming white blizzards later invert *Crime and Punishment*’s extreme heatwave, for example—Poe’s classic Gothic omen undergoes similar treatment. The “white cat” of Mrs Dalton reappears and, as Fabre observes, looks “at Mary’s murderer”

before jumping onto “his shoulder.”²⁴ Having found in the cat’s sudden lunging an “unmistakably Poesque” effect, Fabre confirms that others bookend the sequence as a whole, shaping *Native Son*’s initial descriptions both of Mary’s “unreal bower” and of the “fiery... basement where Bigger” eventually disposes of her corpse.²⁵

In between these echoes of Poe and Dostoevsky, however, *Native Son* develops another intertextual chain, a sequence in which Wright defers his vaunted debts to cast a different light on Bigger’s encounter with a white woman who always seems to him uncanny and “much softer” than she should (116). Here *Native Son* figures Mary’s as a journey from a living image to a still dead doll, and it does so through a set of literary negotiations very different from those on which Wright scholarship has previously dwelt. It is to these less obvious sources that this essay must, necessarily, now turn.

Intimate Voyeurism

An impulse to present Mary’s killing as a smooth and bloodless act thus led *Native Son* for a spell away from the texts that Wright acknowledged as his principal sources. But his postponement of *Native Son*’s plunge into a Dostoevskian and Gothic realm of blood and dismemberment by no means forced him to work in isolation. As he decelerated Mary’s descent from ornament to corpse, finding in her death a fulfilment and exposure of intimate voyeurism, Wright turned towards other sources—towards literary and cinematic narratives more alert to the visual consumption of women and its cultivation of what Mulvey calls the “rhetoric of stasis.”²⁶ Wright’s transformation of these influences provides the grounds for Robyn Wiegman’s belief that *Native Son* offers an exposé of “the rape mythos”—a critique that, while barely encompassing female subjectivity, and black female subjectivity in

particular, still unsettles “traditional structure[s] of male bonding” in the ordinary operation of heteronormative power.²⁷

Extravagant descriptions of women, of course, occur in numerous Western texts. Whereas Martha Nussbaum and others have emphasized those moments when the modern novel places its “complicated and subversive maneuver[s]” at the service of democracy, heightening our capacities for mutuality, understanding, and growth, this crucial cultural form has, as often, acted as an instrument of heteronormative voyeurism, and has incessantly allowed implied readers to linger on female features unobservable in everyday life.²⁸ The modern novel’s kinship with fairy tales and romances is perhaps nowhere clearer than in those clichéd moments when it introduces some eligible young woman and lavishes upon her a description far vaster and more elaborate than it grants to anyone else. And yet, while most fairy tales remain open about such extended descriptions, many using them to launch their plotlines or bring them to a close, modern novels often struggle to fit these sequences into the logic and architecture of realism that they employ. As *Sleeping Beauty* sleeps, Prince Charming can stare; all around her accept Rapunzel as an object of chaste adoration; yet their novelistic heirs, from Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Sylvia Robson* to Frank Norris’s *Trina Sieppe*, cannot be gazed upon with such abandon.²⁹ Elaborate descriptions of feminine beauty—not only in *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) and *McTeague* (1899) but many other modern novels—now threaten verisimilitude, stretching temporality as they sate their visual desires.

Precisely because of this threat—precisely because they must reconcile their realist obligations with their abiding desire to lavish description upon the female objects at their heart—many modern novels begin to attach great burdens to even the briefest glance. Narratives overall, or the individual admirer whom they appoint to carry out their desires, now reap so much information from a single snatched look it can seem as if this look had frozen time. The glance works a magical suspension. Decelerating all in its orbit, it generates

a portrait of such forensic detail that you would think it had lifted its object out of the drawing room or railway carriage or theatre and placed her under a microscope. At such moments a kind of mutual disembodiment occurs. As the woman becomes ornamental, brought to pictorial immobility thanks to her unplotted and extravagant description, so the observing or implied man also vanishes, confiscating the female body on pain of the removal of his own. Under this Puritanical regime, hostile to sex, he can no longer touch and she can no longer be touched. Only through looking can this heteronormative object and subject transact any kind of sexual desire; because it would rupture the scene's magical suspension of time, even the gentlest touch does violence. But many modern novels no sooner stage this crisis of mutual disembodiment than they escape it. Having punctured time to describe a desired woman in luxuriant forensic terms, they tumble back into their plots, racing ahead to the deaths or marriages that for Mulvey allow "a story to return to stasis."³⁰ Only rarely do these novels seem mindful of the holes in verisimilitude that their excessive descriptions have left behind.

By the time he began *Native Son* Wright had read widely in the Western canon and was thus well acquainted with the magical suspensions of time by which many realist novels deliver their extended descriptions of female figures of desire. But the biographical evidence suggests that, as he decelerated Mary's appalling movement from ornament to corpse, he was drawn neither back to Poe nor to these more casual instantiations of realist scopophilia. Instead he turned to Henry James's later tales and the crime novels of Dashiell Hammett among others: two literary fields that not only deliver extended descriptions of their central women but also, crucially, draw attention to the problematic ways in which these descriptions are produced.

Leading scholarship on Wright has sometimes struggled to make sense of his lifelong fascination with James. All the major biographies confirm this fascination, many noting that

Wright considered *The Art of the Novel*, the 1936 collection of James's celebrated New York edition prefaces, nothing less than his "bible."³¹ But even the biography most alert to *Native Son*'s text, Fabre's *The World of Richard Wright*, offers little comment on this foundational influence on Wright. Whereas Jerry W. Ward and Robert Butler's *Encyclopaedia of Richard Wright* (2008) help us recognise that "How 'Bigger' Was Born" resembles a "Jamesian preface," Fabre downplays this legacy, even doubting Wright's own attestations to it.³² Although he concedes that *The Art of the Novel* exerted an "extremely important influence" on Wright's early fiction, Fabre is quick to add the commonsensical caveat that this was only on his "technique"; he then emphasises that only after reaching Chicago in the 1930s did Wright acquire his own copies of *Portrait of a Lady* among other titles in the oeuvre.³³ *The World of Richard Wright* thus in effect restricts James's influence on Wright to the technical sphere before then downplaying it in general.

This, however, sits uneasily alongside evidence presented elsewhere in the biography. It overlooks the fact that, given his remarkable autodidacticism, library books were always far more important to Wright than anything he later acquired; and it contradicts the fact that, shortly after *Native Son*'s publication, Wright drafted some lecture notes in which he acknowledged the following debts: "Experiments in words, Stein; experiments in dialogues, James; experiments in scenes, James; experiments in moods, Conrad."³⁴ Not only in this double debt but also in Wright's almost evangelical enthusiasm for *The Art of Fiction* we find clear proof of James's importance—and clear indications that his influence extended beyond his standard teachings on narrative perspective. By his own admission Wright learnt from James's prefaces how to hitch *Native Son* solely to "Bigger's point of view," such focalization producing what he called a "sharper effect."³⁵ But unless we are to dichotomise literary structure and content altogether, we must also accept that, even after he turned to the

material content of his own “scenes” and “dialogues,” Wright remained mindful of James’s lessons.

Among those lessons, in a number of James’s stories, were some great examples of how narrative literature could reflect on its own voyeuristic inclinations. James, in his later narratives especially, never lavished description on a central female figure without also attributing this description to an admiring male character within an uninterrupted dramatic scene. Prolonged eyeballing here still happens, and what Denis Flannery has called the “scrutiny” of “erotic rancour and rage” remains a central passionate interest.³⁶ But clocks continue to tick. Young women remain objects of erotic observation, but the heteronormative gaze that would scrutinise them no longer elongates time as if by magic and is instead dispersed back into the scene and onto its interested straight male observers. Accordingly, by being reabsorbed back into the text, the heteronormative desire for scopophilia causes these male characters new practical problems, obliging them to justify their looks or spy and “steal” them unseen. No longer effectuating a magical interruption to the realist drama, their long and lingering looks involve voyeurism and furtiveness among other covert operations at constant risk of interception.

This is especially true of *Daisy Miller* (1879). Aptly subtitled *A Study*, this tale soon becomes engulfed in voyeurism, time and again suggesting that its protagonist Winterbourne would rather look than talk to the object of his interest. As such *Daisy Miller* conforms to convention, lavishing description on its eponymous heroine. Yet it also reassimilates these disproportionate descriptions into the architecture of the story itself, consistently transferring the desire to stare back onto Winterbourne’s own impulses. Derided as a “girl-watcher” by Millicent Bell, *Daisy Miller*’s protagonist never misses a chance to live up to this sobriquet.³⁷ Upon discovering the “fresh and beautiful” Daisy in his midst, he inveigles his way into a series of clandestine outposts from which—in the Pincian Gardens, the Palace of the Caesars

and (as the story approaches its inevitable tragedy) the Coliseum—he can look “very hard” at this “graceful object.”³⁸

Consequently, as the desire to gaze at Daisy turns from a fantasy of the text into a social challenge facing its protagonist, the latter becomes, increasingly, mired in bodily shame. His own body he now understands as a problem and a threat: as the agent of another kind of sex beyond the scope of his imagination, and as the potential disruptor of his efforts to ogle women unseen. Altogether “too stiff,” Winterbourne now takes an almost militaristic approach to Daisy, recalibrating his location and hers to see whether he can “advance farther” and scope her better without betraying his desire.³⁹ Always studying her responses to his own body, he feels alarmed whenever these reactions become in any way assertive, lively, or unpredictable. “Addicted to observing and analysing... feminine beauty,” Winterbourne is perturbed by Daisy’s reactions to him, and never more so than when, with a single “immodest glance,” she prevents him from simply staring at her as if she were a photograph.⁴⁰ Soon it seems he is in Italy not to study Renaissance art but to contemplate “a picture of a different kind,” a stilled and ever innocent Daisy, and to find in her innocence at last a woman of whom he need no longer feel “literally afraid.”⁴¹ By his subtitle *A Study*, the suspicion grows, James thus named neither the psychological genre of his story nor the occupation of his hero. Rather, he indicated Winterbourne’s desire to reduce Daisy to a state of pictorial immobility—to a condition of unseeing stasis reminiscent of the close up. Anything Daisy says, like any reaction she makes to the world around her, threatens this fantasy of intimate voyeurism.

As such, as he read *Daisy Miller* in the years before *Native Son*’s publication, Wright would have found another memorable account of a Puritanical attitude in which the visual trounces all other pleasures. Winterbourne cannot even think of kissing, let alone of any other kind of physical contact. Even as, in the story’s final stages, he follows Daisy and her Italian

suitor to the Coliseum at night, he remains far less interested in stating his claim as a rival lover than in continuing to hide and watch her from afar. Her discovery of him thus then shatters far more than his hope of watching her unseen. It also threatens, uncannily, to “cut” her. No longer able to hide in order to stare at the object of his adoration, Winterbourne now gains a curious power over her, an ability to see and name the malaria that will soon cause her death. Her demise, again preserving her beauty, consummates his desire to stare at her without reserve:

Winterbourne stopped, with a sort of horror; and, it must be added, with a sort of relief. It was as if a sudden illumination had been flashed upon the ambiguity of Daisy’s behaviour and the riddle had become easy to read. She was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect. He stood there looking at her—looking at her companion, and not reflecting that though he saw them vaguely, he himself must have been more brightly visible. He felt angry with himself that he had bothered so much about the right way of regarding Miss Daisy Miller. Then, as he was going to advance again, he checked himself; not from the fear that he was doing her injustice, but from a sense of the danger of appearing unbecomingly exhilarated by this sudden revulsion from cautious criticism. He turned away towards the entrance of the place; but as he did so he heard Daisy speak again.

“Why, it was Mr. Winterbourne! He saw me—and he cuts me!”⁴²

Wright was unusually well placed to connect *Daisy Miller’s* tragic climax with the contemporary trend, in 1930s Hollywood and crime fiction, to provide long and lingering close ups of those femmes fatales who would later meet tragic ends. Over the period of *Native Son’s* production, after all, Wright often visited the cinema and spent much time, as Hazel Rowley documented, reading “an array of detective novels.”⁴³ In later essays and interviews, perhaps because he agreed with Raymond Chandler’s view that most were “average, more than middling full, pooped-out,” Wright rarely mentioned any of these crime novels by name or discussed them as extensively as he would, say, *Crime and Punishment*.⁴⁴ Nonetheless his knowledge of these crime novels and their numerous Hollywood adaptations would have

familiarised him with the descent from voyeurism to destruction so often undergone by the female bodies at their heart.

Of all crime writers at the time, Dashiell Hammett, with whom Wright would later correspond, was among the most successful and prolific.⁴⁵ But his *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) and other novels also proved crucial in establishing the paradigm of the femme fatale at the heart of the roman noir. Some critics tend to emphasise the power of these figures, suggesting, in Scott Yarborough's words, that these "the beautiful, intelligent, and corrupt" women typically use their "sexuality as a weapon that can turn men against themselves."⁴⁶ But these always remain tragic figures too; they can never escape the threat of a misogynistic violence often somehow "blamed" on their beauty.

Many examples of this paradigm exist. Two of the most successful noir narratives published in the years of Wright's literary apprenticeship, James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and Hammett's own *Red Harvest*, both climax via their graphic account of a beautiful woman's collapse into death. Moreover, although very different from each other, *Red Harvest* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* both "connect... masculine power with the control of the body," as Jopi Nyman suggests, and both do so by connecting the extended description of their erotic lead to her later, all too predictable, demise.⁴⁷

Whenever they turn to face their female figures, these stories get stuck. The narrative hallmarks of American crime fiction, pace, economy, emotionlessness, unravel as narrator and narrative alike forget the reality of the room and create a portrait of a female subject so luxurious as to anticipate her body's looming ruination. Hammett's *Red Harvest*, sometimes read as a hybrid of hardboiled and noir elements, certainly belongs to the former tradition insofar as it remains unmoved before violence and strives to minimise description to protect the plot's rapid sequence of events.⁴⁸ Dinah Brand's appearance in *Red Harvest*, however, brings about a rare lapse in its austere aesthetic regime, suspending what Nyman calls its

“framework of cynicism.”⁴⁹ The long and extravagant portrayal of this femme fatale instead plunges the Op’s hardboiled narration into quite another aesthetic realm:

“Dinah,” the luger introduced me, “this gentleman has come from San Francisco on behalf of the Continental Detective Agency to inquire into Donald Wilsson’s demise.”

The young woman got up, kicked a couple of newspapers out of her way, and came to me with one hand out.

She was an inch or two taller than I, which made her about five feet eight. She had a broad-shouldered, full-breasted, round-hipped body and big muscular legs. The hand she gave me was soft, warm, strong. Her face was the face of a girl of twenty-five already showing signs of wear. Little lines crossed the corners of her big ripe mouth. Fainter lines were beginning to make nets around her thick-lashed eyes. They were large eyes, blue and a bit blood-shot.

Her coarse hair—brown—needed trimming and was parted crookedly. One side of her upper lip had been rouged higher than the other. Her dress was of a particular unbecoming wine color, and it gaped here and there down one side, where she had neglected to snap the fasteners or they had popped open. There was a run down the front of her left stocking.⁵⁰

At first it seems possible to accept the actions of this scene. Dinah Brand has apparently caught the Op off guard; at the sight of her burgeoning erotic figure he has, uncharacteristically, lost his cool. As such his cataloguing of her physical imperfections seems an effort to regain the mastery he and the narrative risked losing at their first sight of Brand. Even as it restores the Op’s air of cynical detachment, however, this list, in its pausing, its details, its furtive biographical speculations, paradoxically sustains Dinah’s original immobilisation and extends in negative form the suspension of Red Harvest’s ordinary narrative duties. Admiration and criticism alike here flow out of and construct a “pure” view of Brand strangely unconnected from her function within the dramatic architecture of the scene itself.

As in Native Son’s bedroom scene, moreover, this depiction problematizes not only Brand’s body but also that of her male observer. If her human presence flickers in and out of life here, his falls under suspicion: his erotic energies seem channelled into the acceptable or

normatively voyeuristic sense of sight. Such tensions seem untenable, creating a pressure that then seems itself to shape the later scene in which the Op awakes from a laudanum-induced stupor only to find Brand, dead and penetrated, yet somehow bloodless and beautifully intact:

I opened my eyes in the dull light of morning sun filtered through drawn blinds.

I was lying face down on the dining room floor, my head resting on my left forearm. My right arm was stretched straight out. My right hand held the round blue and white handle of Dinah Brand's ice pick. The pick's six-inch needle-sharp blade was buried in Dinah Brand's left breast.

She was lying on her back, dead. Her long muscular legs were stretched out toward the kitchen door. There was a run down the front of her right stocking.

Slowly, gently, as if afraid of awakening her, I let go the ice pick, drew in my arm, and got up.⁵¹

The repetition of the detail of the run in Dinah Brand's stocking here unearths from the murder scene an echo of the Op's initial meeting of her. The long and lingering description that interrupted Hammett's strict generic regime in that first encounter now leads to a fantasy in which her status as an object of observation seems fulfilled. The composed aspect of the scene, and the unlikely fact that "not much blood was in sight," here work to present her to him as a viewable image that remains erotic and alluring even after it has begun to decay from within.⁵² It is as though the Op flees the scene, principally, to preserve its apparent fulfilment of the pure unseeing picture which he had originally hoped to find in her.

Another work that alludes to "The Black Cat," *The Postman Always Rings Twice* follows a similar pattern.⁵³ Again, in a first-person narrative of impeccable cynicism, the appearance of a desirable female proves disturbing, producing an elongation of time that allows our "hero" Frank Chambers to assess her at leisure and in microscopic detail. Even more than in *Red Harvest*, however, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*'s invisible eyeballing of Cora Papadakis seems connected to several later moments in which the mere suggestion of her physical body overwhelms and distorts Chambers' senses until he believes even his most

tender touch will do harm. His automatic violence, his own Midas-like doubt over his own capacity to caress, then lead straight to his belief that his own consumption of Cora's body had caused what he sees as its deterioration. As he laments that "her breasts weren't drawn up and pointing up at me" any more, but were "soft, and spread out in two big pink splotches," he seems also to feel that he has now consumed her, altered her body by touching it, so that what the text describes as its fall from beauty seems a result of his own actions.⁵⁴ Opening moments of intimate voyeurism persist, even in the throes of the actual affair, as Cain's hero seems to feel he cannot make love to his heroine without disfiguring her in some way. Her death in a car crash at the end of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* brings to a violent conclusion the conflation of erotic touch and violence made apparent in the opening pages of the novel.

Of course these noir sequences, in their shocking and somehow irresistible movement from the observation of the female body to its destruction, stand at a distance from the works of Henry James. But the peculiar representation of Bigger's observation of Mary and her immaculate death tends to suggest that, in the voracious reading of noir narratives and James's oeuvre that he carried out when preparing *Native Son*, Wright had discovered a common preoccupation with erotic observation, touch, and female beauty. Although criticism has focused on the influence of Poe and Dostoevsky, the actual sequence of *Native Son*'s first murder draws far more heavily on these other sources. Mary Dalton's demise recalls the beautiful deaths of noir's femme fatales, after all; yet the machinations preceding it, by which Bigger edges closer to gawp at her unmolested, are, arguably, no less reminiscent of the studies of female observation central to James's oeuvre.

These other influences can seem to carry Wright away from his central concern of race and indeed from his own childhood knowledge of the Jim Crow crime of reckless eyeballing. By the time he turned to *Savage Holiday*, the activity of erotic observation as well

as the violence to which it gives rise are delegated to Erskine Fowler, Wright's first and only white protagonist. Halfway through the novel, Fowler has a powerful and prophetic dream that remains silent on the matter of racial difference yet which nonetheless echoes Mary Dalton's death:

Fatigued, he stretched upon his bed and fell into a sleep that was troubled by dreams. He thought that he was a child again and was in a huge and empty church... and then suddenly he saw ahead of him a coffin beautifully wrought in shining silver and surrounded by heaping banks of flowers and as he neared the gleaming coffin something urgent compelled him to look down and he saw a dead woman who was lovely and young and lying in a flowing white muslin dress and it seemed that she was not really dead but just sleeping and then a strange man whom he felt that he had seen somewhere before but could not remember where came up to him from his left and the man's face was beginning to blur and he felt that the man was asking his permission to open the coffin so that he could see the entire body of the woman and the man reached forward with a hand clad in a white glove and slid down the lower half of the lid of the coffin and there lay revealed the lower half of the woman's body which was nude and he could see that her legs were moving slightly and then, by some strange power, the woman's body began to rot right before his eyes, rapidly, and the woman was turning an ashen color and then dark, the flesh falling away, crumbling, festering, melting, and finally resembling a blackened mass that shimmered and assumed the look of something slimy and wet and sticky and running, like tar, and it seemed that he was about to inhale the awful smell of putrefaction and he partially awakened, sweating, mumbling, sighing...⁵⁵

Race remains invisible throughout the dream. Although streams of consciousness have always been equated with a voluntary loss of authorial control, Wright here ensures that his own experiment in the modernist subgenre stands at some distance from the burden of racial representation that had affected the reception of all his previous work. As it thus epitomises the deracialising programme of the novel overall, I hesitate to bring Wright's own African-American identity to bear on Savage Holiday's associational sequence. Nonetheless, and especially if read alongside *Native Son*, Jim Crow's demonization of black male sexuality continues to reverberate through even Fowler's personal dreams. His violence, his vicious prudery, his belief that if he will desire an erotic object he will automatically imperil it: all

these instincts, laid bare in his associational dream, do find a grotesque reflection in the hypersexualised racist stereotype behind the crime of reckless eyeballing. Becoming apparent across Wright's oeuvre as a whole are some important and perhaps unexpected connections between lynching hysteria and Fowler's pursuit of intimate voyeurism, and these connections tend to grasp Jim Crow's sexual politics neither as an aberration nor exception to ordinary US norm but a mere magnification of its underlying propensity for misogynistic violence.

In the 1970s a number of feminists, especially in the UK, centred their critiques of patriarchal culture less on its noted treatment of woman-as-objects and more on the possibility it might treat them as pictures. Objectification remains perhaps the most familiar item within the vocabulary of feminist scholarship and activism. Yet in Laura Mulvey's 1970s writings it famously yields to scopophilia: a sense that Hollywood cinema, and the sophisticated forms of Western culture it epitomises, harbour an impulse to treat women principally as sources of "visual pleasure," the optic eclipsing all other senses in its erotic domination. Whereas much earlier feminism had focused on masculine power and its sexual and political exploitation of women, indeed, scopophilia focuses on that particular form of exploitation in which the latter are consumed, and consumed as if they were images ever unable to return the voyeuristic gaze. In our present digital age, quite clearly, Mulvey's 1970s intervention, by focusing feminist critique on the treatment of women as living images, has, if anything, become even more urgent. But so have the ethical anxieties that shape Mary's death in *Native Son*. In many ways pre-empting a 1970s concern with the visual consumption of women, Wright's knowing subversion of the established practice of invisible eyeballing exposed the different ways in which a culture invested in chastity and male power finally reframes sex as violence, equating male desire with the destruction of its subject. Wright's own coming of age—his personal resistance of a Jim Crow code that saw in eyes alone provocation enough for all acts of sexual aggression—thus enabled him to reveal, in US

crime fiction and Hollywood aesthetics alike, tensions astir in the impulse toward the pictorialization of women.

1 Caroline O'Meara asserts that *The Raincoats* effectuated a fullblown "feminist reinterpretation of the punk project" in "The Raincoats: Breaking Down Punk Rock's Masculinities," 301.

2 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p.320.

3 Poe, "The Black Cat," p.329.

4 Other major scholarship on Wright's debts to Poe include James Smethurst's "Invented by Horror: the Gothic and African American Literary Ideology in *Native Son*," 29-40; Linda Prior, "A Further Word on Richard Wright's Use of Poe in *Native Son*," 52-3; and Christopher Peterson, *Bestial Traces*. Smethurst's definitive essay also touches on Dostoevsky's influence. A fuller examination of the latter debt is Maria R. Bloshteyn, "Rage and Revolt: Dostoevsky and Three African-American Writers," 277-309.

5 Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, p.187.

6 Wallach, *Richard Wright: from Black Boy to Global Citizen*, p.167.

7 Wright, *The Long Dream*, p.157; Wright, *Savage Holiday*, p.188, p.220, p.214.

8 Wright, *Native Son*, p.61. All subsequent references to this edition appear in the text itself.

9 Wright, *Native Son: The Restored Text*, p.32.

10 *Native Son*, p.94. In *Fetishism and Curiosity* Mulvey also historicizes scopophilia. She notes that the close-up, visual pleasure's habitual modus operandi, became an increasingly familiar facet of Hollywood productions after 1930, and she attributes this in part to a general

cultural movement away from the “raciness,” openness, “and sexual self-sufficiency” of 1920s gender mores. *Fetishism and Curiosity*, pp.44-6.

11 Barthes, “The Face of Garbo” in *Mythologies*, p.57.

12 Guttman, 175.

13 Shabazz, *Spatializing Blackness*, p.44.

14 As Herman Beavers puts it, Mary is “the embodiment of a sexual and social taboo in cinematic form.” See Beavers, “Vertical Blues: Turbulence, Disorder, and the Emplotment of Surplus Meaning in *Native Son*,” in *Richard Wright’s Native Son*, p.106.

15 Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” p.158.

16 Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, p.141

17 Irigaray, p.176.

18 As such I here depart from Christopher Peterson’s *Bestial Traces* (2013) among other exonerative readings of *Native Son* that suggest, in Peterson’s words, that Bigger “accidentally smothers Mary to death”; *Bestial Traces*, p.35. As Alan W. France recognises the text is quite clear that Bigger commits two “rape-slayings”: one shambolic and impromptu (Mary), the other total and brutal in its control (Bessie). France, 417.

19 Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, p.xv.

20 Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, pp.44-6.

21 *Crime and Punishment*’s first murder, with its account of the victim as her “blood gushed pit as from an upturned glass, and her body collapsed backwards,” remains visceral and shocking, evocative far more of Mary’s post mortis dismemberment than the moment of her death. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, pp.114-5.

22 Poe, “The Black Cat,” pp.326-27.

23 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, p.167.

24 Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright*, p.31.

25 Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright*, p.32.

26 Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, p.41.

27 Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, p.103. Wiegman, by reading *Native Son* as a critique of misogyny that nonetheless also struggles to inhabit female subjectivity, in some ways reiterates Barbara Johnson's position in *The Feminist Difference*, p.75.

28 Nussbaum, "The Stain of Illegitimacy," p.171.

29 Early in *Sylvia's Lovers* the shop assistant Hester Rose waits "to serve Sylvia," and the ensuing delay allows Gaskell to describe her hero at considerable length. See *Sylvia's Lovers*, pp.24-5. Naturalism's aspirations of objectivity, meanwhile, become strained when McTeague's protagonist first meets Trina Sieppe. As McTeague ogles her, his hands shaking "dumbly," the narrative lists its metaphoric options, comparing Trina's hair to a "royal crown of swarthy bands, a veritable sable tiara," and "the coiffure of a queen." Small wonder that McTeague then backs away, "embarrassed, troubled." McTeague, p.17. A solution to his desire to watch Trina unchecked then falls into his lap: he persuades her to undertake some dental work and, putting her to sleep with ether, for "some time he stood watching her as she lay there, unconscious and helpless, and very pretty. He was alone with her, and she was absolutely without defense." McTeague, p.21.

30 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, p.71.

31 Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, p.92. In her eccentric *Richard Wright, Daemoniac Genius*, Margaret Walker confirms Wright's intense appreciation of *The Art of the Novel*, and recalls that Wright talked constantly of James while writing *Native Son*. Walker, p.75.

32 Ward and Butler, *The Encyclopaedia of Richard Wright*, p.205.

33 Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright*, p.15.

34 *The World of Richard Wright*, p.15.

- 35 Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," p.459.
- 36 Flannery, On Sibling Love, p.60.
- 37 Bell, Meaning in Henry James, p.132.
- 38 James, "Daisy Miller," p.4.
- 39 "Daisy Miller," p.37. "Daisy Miller," p.6.
- 40 "Daisy Miller," p.7.
- 41 "Daisy Miller," p.41-4.
- 42 "Daisy Miller," p.47-8.
- 43 Rowley, Richard Wright: The Life and Times, p.158.
- 44 Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," p.5.
- 45 Richard Wright: The Life and Times, p.158.
- 46 Yarborough, "The Dark Lady: Temple Drake as Femme Fatale," 52.
- ⁴⁷ Nyman, Men Alone, p.107.
- 48 Andrew Pepper, "The American Roman Noir," p.60.
- 49 Nyman, Men Alone, p.305.
- 50 Hammett, Red Harvest, p.39.
- 51 Red Harvest, pp.205-6.
- 52 Red Harvest, p.206.
- 53 Into his description of the first murder Cain places a classic Gothic omen: a cat stumbles into his hero's car, falls onto its fuse box, and is "killed... deader than hell." After this incident later clinch the protagonist's conviction, Cora gloats, "'Ain't that funny, how unlucky cats are for you?'" Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, pp.104-5.
- 54 *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, p.86.
- 55 Wright, *Savage Holiday*, pp.170-1.

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