

## *Native Son* in Prison: Rhetorical Performance as Restored Behavior

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WHEN I decided to include Richard Wright's *Native Son* in a literature class at the Lima (Ohio) Correctional Institution, I was aware of the potential dangers involved in introducing the novel into a medium-security prison. Farrel Corcoran has warned that controversial topics in prison classrooms "can stimulate arguments that develop more animosity than enlightenment" (55), and even a bare plot synopsis reveals that Wright's novel is controversial. Published in 1940, *Native Son* tells the story of Bigger Thomas, an impoverished black teenager living in Chicago's southside ghetto. Bigger's accidental killing of Mary Dalton, a wealthy young white woman, results in a rape and murder trial conducted amidst a media campaign that reveals the fear and hatred with which white Chicagoans view the impoverished black underclass. I knew that Wright's novel would raise issues of race, class, and power, and I had read Onita Estes-Hicks's account of her own effort to teach *Native Son*—an effort marked by "the hostile responses of white students, the defensive remarks of black students, and the tensions between the two groups [that] mirrored the growing intolerance and tensions of these trying times" (6).

Although I had no desire to exacerbate the racial tension that is inescapable in America's prisons, I shared Estes-Hicks's belief that Wright's novel could shed light on social issues that remain as important today as they were when *Native Son* was published fifty years ago. I also believed that many of the inmates, both black and white, would recognize something of themselves in Bigger, a character Wright describes as the product of a civilization that "contained no spiritual sustenance, had created no culture which could hold and claim his allegiance and faith, had sensitized him and left him stranded . . ." ("How" xix). And I hoped that the men would share Wright's experience of the novel as "at once something private and public by its very nature" ("How" vii) if they were provided a public forum for expressing their private encounters with the text.

What concerned me most was how to structure the inmates' public transactions with *Native Son*. The harsh realities of prison life conspire against open communication, and some inmates use silence as protective camouflage to conceal themselves from the numerous predators in their environment. I knew that some of the men would be reluctant to discuss the novel in an open forum, since they could place themselves at risk if they voiced unpopular opinions.<sup>1</sup> So I planned to supplement open discussions with a more formal activity: a performance trial of Bigger Thomas,

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with the inmates serving as judge, jurors, and witnesses. This plan seemed feasible for several reasons: it would provide a structure with which each man was familiar, and that structure could provide a sense of ritualized decorum to contain the powerful emotions that the performance could produce. However, I modified this plan after the reality of the prison setting intervened and several men advised me that the class contained both white supremacists and black nationalists, some of whom would be incensed regardless of the outcome of the trial. The modified assignment asked the men to write speeches for performance in response to the following scenario:

Imagine that you are testifying for either the defense or the prosecution in the Bigger Thomas trial, and construct a speech that you could deliver in court. In that speech you should make clear (1) whether you believe that Bigger Thomas should be convicted of murder, and (2) what penalty, if any, you believe should be imposed on him if he is convicted. In making your plea to the court you should support your recommendations with detailed arguments based on the facts of the case and on any other factors that you believe the court should consider.

In the pages that follow I will analyze the complex contextual constraints that the men had to negotiate in preparing their speeches. I then will examine the speeches that the men wrote; in doing so I will consider the roles that they adopted and the persuasive strategies that they employed. I will conclude by analyzing the speeches in light of the theory of restored behavior that Richard Schechner advances in *Between Theater and Anthropology*, a theory that I will use to explain the significance of literature-based rhetorical performance in prison.

### *Three Constraining Frameworks*

When I presented my scenario to the inmates, they immediately perceived difficulties that I had not considered. Their concerns reveal the multiple constraints that they had to consider as they prepared their speeches for performance. Various conceptual systems are available for categorizing these constraints; for example, a cognitive psychologist such as Ulric Neisser might label them "orienting schemata" or "cognitive maps," categorizing them as mental representations that limit the speakers' options. The conceptual system that I find most useful is advanced by Erving Goffman in *Frame Analysis*. Within Goffman's system the complexity of my performance assignment can be viewed as the result of three "layered frameworks," each of which poses its own constraints. I will use Goffman's system to analyze the difficulties that the men encountered; however, I will modify his terminology in order to explain as clearly as I can how his frameworks apply to my literature-based performance assignment.

In Goffman's terms the first system of constraints constitutes a primary framework determined by social convention. I will call this the *experiential framework*, because the constraints at this level result from each inmate's previous experiences of court proceedings. My own knowledge of courtroom proceedings was derived more from television and film representations than from first-hand experience, and so the context invoked by my scenario seemed realistic to me. However, many of the men were concerned about the artificiality of the rhetorical occasion that I had constructed. Based on their own experiences of the American judicial system, they perceived a trial as a formal, orchestrated event that provides few participants with the broad license for expression that my scenario provided. The inmates' perceptions

were shaped to a great extent by the "role" in which they had been cast in their own trials—the role of defendant, which in many cases neither required nor allowed them to speak at all. Together we tried to identify alternative roles that would provide broader opportunities for expression: roles such as defense attorney, prosecuting attorney, and expert witness. Most of the men readily accepted these roles, but some remained constrained by their knowledge of the rigid regulations governing speech in courtrooms. Their real experiences continued to contradict the idealized conditions of the performance scenario.

I will use the term *fictional framework* to describe a second system of constraints that the men encountered. The fictional framework is formed by the story of the novel, which contains constraining elements that the speakers had to accept as a "supplemental reality" in preparing their speeches. Several of the men had trouble determining which story elements to accept as "givens" and which to perceive as "variables." For example, one man inquired whether he could create new evidence that would have a bearing on the trial, asking whether "the facts of the case" were limited to those presented in the novel. This man wanted to consider Bigger's killing of Mary Dalton as a negotiable variable from the novel, while I wanted him to consider it as a constraining given. Conversely, other men asked whether I expected them to use the same arguments that Bigger's lawyer advances in the novel—they assumed that the identity and actions of the defense attorney were fixed constraints even though I did not. Such questions were inevitable, because the distinction between givens and variables was an arbitrary one, determined primarily by my desire for the speakers to project themselves into the story without altering significantly the events in the plot leading up to Bigger's trial.

To label the final constraining system, I will use the term *rhetorical framework*. This system of constraints is imposed by the assignment situation itself. It was this framework that established the context into which the men had to project their rhetorical performances. Goffman describes this process as "keying," by which he means that an activity, "already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something quite else" (41). The distinction between the primary framework of the courtroom and the rhetorical framework of the performance assignment became evident when a man inquired concerning evaluation criteria (which I had attempted to downplay). Although I asked the men to prepare speeches to deliver in court, they recognized that the conventions of forensic rhetoric imposed by the courtroom context were transformed by the performance assignment context. Not only did the speakers have to draw selectively on their actual experiences in court and on the supplemental reality that the novel provided, they also had to consider what additional constraints were imposed by the fact that their speeches would be evaluated by a teacher instead of a jury. Although I attempted to minimize the differences between the experiential and rhetorical frameworks, I could not eliminate the differences entirely.

I have used Goffman's conceptual system to suggest the actual complexity of the seemingly simple task that I posed for the inmates; however, I also see a more general utility in my adaptation of Goffman's frameworks. I would suggest that the experiential, fictional, and rhetorical frameworks together may constitute a useful system for analyzing the complexity of *any* literature-based rhetorical performance

assignment. I invite anyone interested in such assignments to consider how the three frameworks could be used to illuminate his or her own work.<sup>2</sup>

*Positions, Roles, and Strategies*

Thirteen inmates chose to write speeches for the scenario that I have described. Of these thirteen men, four prepared speeches that supported the prosecution's case while nine prepared speeches in defense of Bigger Thomas. Considering not only Estes-Hicks's description of racial tension in discussions of *Native Son* but also the concerns that several inmates expressed to me, I find it important to note that very little correlation exists between the race of the speakers and the positions they adopted: of the four men arguing for the prosecution, two were black and two white; of the nine arguing for the defense, five were black and four were white.<sup>3</sup>

Only one of the four men siding with the prosecution unambiguously identified the role that he had assumed—the role of prosecuting attorney. The other men offered comments whose style and content seem consistent with the prosecuting attorney's role; however, their speeches do not contain explicit statements indicating their roles, and so the possibility exists that these men envisioned other roles or did not define a specific role at all. The latter possibility makes sense in light of the conflicting demands posed for some of the men by their courtroom experiences and the rhetorical framework of the performance assignment: these men may have feared that by identifying an official role they would have limited their options as speakers.

The speeches that the men prepared for the prosecution relied primarily on pathos as a persuasive strategy—these speakers attempted to sway the emotions of an audience by stressing the gruesomeness of Bigger's crime. The following example of this strategy is from the speech prepared by Oliver, a black inmate in his early thirties:

In [his] statement [Bigger] says that he cut the poor girl's head off before cremating her in the furnace. . . .

He isn't lying! Here, take a look at state's exhibit #3 and #4. Here's the knife he used to cut through the warm flesh of Mary Dalton's neck. And here! Here is the ax which the butcher used to sever the bone of the neck from the skull. . . . Look at what he did to poor sweet Mary!

Oliver's speech also exemplifies another strategy used by three of the four men who argued for the prosecution: the falsification of the supplemental reality that the text provides. Wright's novel makes clear that Bigger Thomas killed Mary Dalton accidentally and then decapitated her corpse in an effort to hide the evidence of his crime. However, Oliver suggests that Bigger may have dismembered Mary while she was still alive:

Consider the fact that . . . poor darling Mary's bones are not intact, which could indicate that this hideous monster dissected her, limb from limb, at his leisure. It must have been horrifying, slow . . . and agonizing to be tortured in such a manner.

The two other men—one black and one white—who falsified the supplemental reality of the novel did so by arguing that Bigger raped Mary Dalton, even though Wright's text makes clear that Bigger did not. Both of these men argued that Bigger murdered Mary to conceal her rape, an analysis that provides a plausible motive for

the killing. This strategy is illustrated in an excerpt from the speech by Donald, a white inmate in his late twenties:

Bigger Thomas, the defendant, is a killer. He is guilty of killing an innocent harmless girl, and why did he kill her? He killed her to keep her silent after he viciously raped and abused her.

In arguing that Bigger Thomas raped Mary Dalton, the two speakers followed the example of the prosecuting attorney in Wright's novel; however, their decision to falsify the facts of the case suggests several questions. Were the speakers accepting the prosecuting attorney's strategy as a constraining given from the fictional framework? Were they drawing on their own experiential frameworks and considering the falsification of facts to be a standard practice of actual prosecuting attorneys? I cannot answer these questions; however, they both suggest explanations that seem plausible to me.

All four of the speakers arguing for the prosecution advocated the death penalty for Bigger Thomas. Two of these speakers relied on pathos to justify the death penalty, extending their use of a strategy that they employed throughout their speeches. Oliver's speech again provides an example:

This monster! Destroyed this poor loving girl! And his act doesn't stop there, it torments her loved ones. She was an only child, her mother blind, her father old. They can have no more.

Ladies and gentlemen, let's not let this beast have any more either. He doesn't deserve to live! In the interest of God, the world, and Man! I demand and beg you to grant this beast his just dues.

I implore you to find him guilty of murder, and sentence him to death!

The other two speakers based their advocacy on dispassionate appeals relying on logos, advancing arguments that detailed a pragmatic rationale rooted in historical precedents. This strategy is illustrated in an excerpt from the speech by Ed, a white inmate in his late twenties:

The point [is] that [in] our society, as in any civilized society, laws were formulated to protect our citizens from those who sought to take that which was not theirs. Bigger Thomas has taken the life of Mary Dalton—one of our citizens; therefore, I say to you, find him guilty of the charge of murder and impose upon him the death penalty.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the imposition of the death penalty for the crime of murder has a long history of acceptance, both in the United States and in England. The common-law rule imposed a mandatory death sentence on all convicted murderers. You might have asked yourself why we have a death penalty? The death penalty, ladies and gentlemen, is said to serve two principal social purposes: retribution and deterrence of capital crimes by prospective offenders. Capital punishment is an expression of society's moral outrage at particularly offensive conduct. This function may be unappealing to many, but it is essential in an ordered society that asks its citizens to rely on legal processes, rather than self-help, to vindicate their wrongs.

Ed's speech exhibits an enthymemic approach to argumentation as it attempts to establish a logical justification for capital punishment.

Of the nine men arguing for the defense, four included unambiguous statements (such as "in defending my client") indicating the roles that they adopted. Two of these speakers (one black and one white) opted for the role of defense attorney, while two (both black) chose the role of witness. The other speakers offered comments

whose style and content seem consistent with the defense attorney's role. However, they did not include explicit phrases that would identify their role unambiguously, and so it is possible that these men did not identify a specific role at all. Instead they may have preferred to leave their role ambiguous in order to minimize conflicts between their courtroom experiences and the assignment's rhetorical framework.

The nine inmates who defended Bigger Thomas all used multifaceted strategies of persuasion. The complexity of their speeches makes them difficult to categorize, but a few generalizations do seem warranted. Of the four speakers who did not specify the role that they adopted, two (both white men in their twenties) based their appeals primarily on *logos*, presenting detailed legalistic arguments to prove that Bigger was guilty of a lesser crime than first-degree murder. The other three speakers who did not specify a role all used a blend of *pathos* and *logos*, the same combination favored by those who chose the role of defense attorney.

Of the two speakers who used the attorney's role to defend Bigger, one began his appeal with *pathos* and the other with *logos*. *Pathos* dominated in the introduction prepared by Ray, a white inmate in his early twenties. Here is an excerpt from his introduction:

As I stand before you today, there are two mothers weeping. One mother cries the tears of mourning, the tears of loss; while another mother cries the tears of a loss that has not yet occurred. If [Bigger is] convicted, [his] mother will suffer the same loss as did Mary Dalton's mother. . . .

Ray's introduction contrasts with the one prepared by Rob, a black inmate in his early thirties. Rob relies primarily on *logos* as he attempts to neutralize the emotional appeal of the speech presented by the prosecuting attorney in Wright's novel. Here is an excerpt from Rob's introduction:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, we have heard the argument of the prosecution. It is an extremely inflammatory argument depicting my client Bigger Thomas as a bad, bad man. . . . A man who has nothing to do with his life but to cause the suffering of others. A man who is the cold-blooded, calculated killer of one Mary Dalton, for whose father this young man worked. Based on the prosecutor's feelings . . . and a payload of circumstantial evidence, the prosecutor would have you see fit to declare Bigger Thomas a first-degree murderer . . . and sentence [him] to die in the electric chair for his hideous crime. But is this crime as hideous and as calculated as the prosecution would have it seem? Or is the prosecution relying on the past sensationalism of this case and the racial overtones it appears to present to induce you the jury into irrationally railroading this young man to death without really examining your consciences? In my argument for the defendant I will show you just how easy it is to manipulate you the jurors in this case and how in fact it will be literally impossible for this young man to get a fair and impartial trial. . . . And on that note I shall proceed.

Following their introductions, both Ray and Rob indict the social conditions that produced Bigger Thomas; however, each styles his comments to fit the appeal established in his introduction, with Ray continuing to rely heavily on *pathos* and Rob on *logos*.

The indictment of a racist society is a strategy that also was used by the two speakers who chose the role of witness. I find it notable that the only inmates to choose this role were both black men in their late thirties—men somewhat older than the average for the class. Speaking as witnesses, these two inmates first sought to

establish their ethos as speakers—a strategy ignored by everyone else in the class. This concern for ethos is detectable in the following excerpt from the introduction prepared by Larry:

I am Larry Smith, a black man. I am not here to convince the jury of Bigger's innocence, because Bigger himself has already confessed to the murder of Mary Dalton. However, I would like to go back to the end of the Civil War and come forth to show you the jury that Bigger Thomas alone is not the only guilty party.

And the concern for ethos also is present in the speech prepared by Willie:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I come before you this evening on behalf of Mr. Bigger Thomas. I have known the defendant *all* of my life and I feel that after looking into the very heart of this individual we will not find a wanton murderer, but a victim himself.

Following their efforts to establish their authority as speakers, both Larry and Willie discuss circumstances that mitigate Bigger's culpability. Larry presents a broad historical overview of the oppression that black people have suffered in America, while Willie supports his position by detailing the specific conditions of Bigger's daily existence.

Although their strategies differ as their speeches develop, both Larry and Willie benefit from their initial attempts to establish their ethos. When Willie says that he has known Bigger *all* of his life, I suspect that he is not speaking metaphorically. I suspect that both Larry (who grew up in East Cleveland) and Willie (who grew up in Watts) know from their own experience the truth of Wright's observation that "there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect" ("How" viii). Like Wright both Larry and Willie have known Bigger since childhood, and, I think, their arguments rely as much on their firsthand experience of racism and poverty as on the descriptions in Wright's novel.

#### *Rhetorical Performance as Restored Behavior*

Although the preceding analysis of rhetorical strategies provides an indication of how several speakers negotiated the constraints that my performance scenario posed, it does not reveal some fundamental similarities in speeches that relied on differing strategies of persuasion. Nor does the analysis reveal an important function served by the literature-based rhetorical performances. A different type of analysis is needed to complement the discussion provided above.

I believe that a useful conceptual system for complementing my rhetorical analysis is provided by Richard Schechner in *Between Theater and Anthropology*, where he advances a theory of performance as "restored behavior." The term "restored behavior" encompasses a vast spectrum of human actions; according to Schechner, it includes any activity that is "symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances" (36). Schechner then attempts to clarify his definition:

These difficult terms express a single principle: The self can act in/as another; the social or transindividual self is a role or a set of roles. Symbolic and reflexive behavior is the hardening into theater of social, religious, aesthetic, medical, and educational process. Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the *n*th time. Performance is "twice-behaved behavior." (36)

In terms of Schechner's theory, at one level the inmates' speeches are written for a "restored nonevent"; that is, they are written for a re-enactment of an event that exists only in the pages of a work of fiction—the trial of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. However, at another level the speeches are written for re-enactments of actual events—the inmates' own trials.

The inmates who argued for the prosecution were not merely arguing against Bigger Thomas; they also were projecting themselves back into a courtroom setting, but in a position of power that they had not occupied in their actual trials. Availing themselves of the power that their performance roles bestowed, they constructed speeches that I would call *socially sanctioned retribution pleas*—speeches that invoked the power of the community to judge and to order punishment. Such an invocation of community authority is evident in the conclusion of the speech that Ed prepared:

When people begin to believe that organized society is unwilling or unable to impose upon criminal offenders the punishment they deserve, then there are sown the seeds of anarchy, of the self-help I spoke of earlier, of vigilante justice and lynch law! Ladies and gentlemen, I demand—no—society demands that Bigger Thomas pay for his crimes against us with his life.

Through their rhetorical performances, inmates such as Ed restored themselves—at least symbolically—to positions of power from which they could invoke the same legal code that they had violated. Their restored behavior constitutes a symbolic reintegration into a society from which they remain physically isolated. This reintegration was sought by all of the men, both black and white, who argued for the prosecution.

Most of the inmates who argued for the defense also used their rhetorical performances to project themselves back into a courtroom in a position of power; however, these speakers used their "twice-behaved behavior" for a very different end than that pursued by the speakers for the prosecution. Instead of using their speeches to invoke the authority of the community, most of the inmates who defended Bigger Thomas attempted to judge the community that had judged them. This strategy was executed most effectively by older black inmates—especially Rob, Larry, and Willie—but it was attempted by all but one of the inmates who spoke in defense of Bigger. These speakers constructed speeches that I would call *oppression narratives*—speeches that chronicled their own experiences of injustice as well as the injustices that Bigger Thomas suffered. This approach is evident in the conclusion of the speech by Rob:

The prosecutor [is attempting] to make an example out of [Bigger] by seeing that he is jailed for murder and executed. But for whom? He is clearly not making this example for Bigger or myself who know the injustices the courts have done to blacks all along. . . . [Bigger] has been forced to endure the hardships and degradations that white society has placed on him for simply being black. Not wrong, not violent, not stupid, not hateful or spiteful, but simply black. I feel that if there is some monster lurking in the heart and mind of Bigger Thomas then it was people just like every one of you that crowd into this courtroom . . . that put that monster there.

For Rob no reintegration into society is possible—not even a symbolic reintegration. Until the actual society judges the offenses of the oppressors alongside the offenses of

the oppressed, Rob must render a symbolic judgment—the only judgment that he is empowered to render—through the restored behavior of his rhetorical performance.

In one compound phrase Rob eliminates the distance between Bigger Thomas and himself, linking Bigger's knowledge with his own knowledge of injustice. However, Bigger and Rob differ in at least one important regard. Richard Wright has observed that Bigger Thomas "did not offer in his life any articulate verbal expression" ("How" xxv). But when given the opportunity to defend Bigger, Rob was able to break his own silence, rendering articulate not only Bigger's life but also his own. In the restored behavior of all of the inmates' speeches, but especially in the oppression narratives that Rob and several other men prepared, I see the value of literature-based rhetorical performances.

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault notes that in the nineteenth century American penal authorities agreed concerning the reformative efficacy of "the terrible discipline of silence" (237). The authorities believed that silence encouraged inmates to reflect on the wickedness of their ways and that it rendered them receptive to the moral instruction that the jailers provided when they broke the silence themselves. Although few penal authorities today would attribute reformative powers to silence, many prisons now use silence as a punishment, banishing outspoken inmates to the silence of solitary confinement. And, as I have noted, some inmates rely on silence for survival. Because various forces compel silence in prison, teachers face formidable obstacles when they attempt to convince inmates that the prison classroom is a safe forum for self-expression.

<sup>2</sup>Three topics for research seem particularly important to me. Concerning the experiential framework, it would be useful to know why some speakers find their personal experiences helpful while others find similar experiences debilitating. It seems clear that some knowledge of courtroom proceedings is a prerequisite for preparing an effective speech in response to the assignment that I provided, yet some speakers were paralyzed by their knowledge. Concerning the fictional framework, it would be useful to know how a novel's narrative point of view influences the speakers' perceptions of what is given and what is variable as they construct a supplemental reality from the text. For example, I would expect that novels using unreliable first-person narrators would provide speakers with more freedom in constructing a supplemental reality than do novels using omniscient narrators; however, I have no substantial evidence to support my prediction. Concerning the rhetorical framework, it would be useful to explore the extent to which dissonance between it and the other frameworks can be reduced. Two strategies for doing this come to mind: using ungraded performance assignments or developing evaluation criteria that approximate the actual conditions of the courtroom context insofar as possible.

<sup>3</sup>In my analysis of the inmates' speeches I have changed the names of the speakers in order to protect their identities. However, I have not changed the race or age of the speakers, because I believe that this information will allow readers to note the limited extent to which age and race were factors in the inmates' selection of positions, roles, and strategies.

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