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Bigger at the Movies: *Sangre Negra* and the Cinematic Projection of *Native Son*

THY PHU

Abstract

Entitled *Sangre Negra*, Richard Wright's 1951 film adaptation of his novel *Native Son* is a coproduction with Argentine studio Sono Film under the direction of French director Pierre Chenal. Not only was the project undertaken during Wright's extended period of exile, it also served as a means of projecting Bigger Thomas to a space that exceeds the local confines of the race struggle in Chicago, the novel's specific setting. Situating *Sangre Negra* within a transnational context, this article considers the cultural implications of this film adaptation for forging links between African Americans and Afro-Latin Americans. The article argues that this adaptation serves as an attempt to realize Bigger's aspirations for filmic representation expressed in the novel; at the same time, this character's aspirations function as an unlikely vehicle for the ambitions of Argentine cinema. In this manner the adaptation serves as a symbolic form of adoption, whereby the predicament of the "native son" converges with that of the Argentine film industry, which, in seeking international recognition, mirrored Wright's own ambitions for his most famous character.

He wanted to see a movie; his senses hungered for it. In a movie he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open.

—RICHARD WRIGHT, *NATIVE SON* (1940)

In 1951, several years into his self-imposed exile to France, Richard Wright made a surprising return to the U.S. Wright had, of course, traveled home previously, as no formal barrier prevented him from doing so.¹ This time, however, the return was meant to be, quite simply, spectacular: a film adaptation of his first novel, *Native Son*, a project conceived over a decade earlier, debuted in select theaters across the nation.² Within the still emerging history of black cinema traced by scholars and cultural critics, Richard Wright's protracted efforts to adapt his landmark novel *Native Son* stands as a puzzling effort.³ Although a critical and commercial disaster

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that is long forgotten, and perhaps justly so, this adaptation is remarkable for several reasons. Not only was the title role of twenty-year-old Bigger Thomas played by none other than the middle-aged and slightly paunchy Wright himself, the film was also the result of an unlikely international coproduction, a team consisting of a French director (Pierre Chenal) and an Argentine studio (Sono Film). But while the reception of the film, indeed of Wright's symbolic homecoming, was cool in the U.S., audiences in Argentina were far more enthusiastic. So encouraging was the Argentine reception to the story of Bigger Thomas that arguably the character—as well as Wright himself—were, in this sense, more at home in Buenos Aires than they were in the major American cities where the film was shown. Though Wright's attachment to this project is understandable (he had long sought to adapt his first novel), less obvious are his partners' motivations, especially the keenness with which Sono enthusiastically backed the project. What was Bigger's appeal for Sono Film, and, if Argentine audiences identified with this specifically "American" character, what was the basis of this identification? Why would a narrative explicitly tied to Chicago, the source of *Native Son's* "native" affiliation, be so readily embraced by reviewers in Buenos Aires?

Drawing upon archival documents, this article explores the significance of the protracted process of adapting the novel *Native Son* into the film *Sangre Negra* for understanding potential connections between African American and Latin American, or rather Afro-Latin American, contexts of racial formation. Wright's adaptation of his novel tentatively opens up, only to foreclose, opportunities for Afro-Latin American identification. Censorship and tensions stemming from the complexities of collaboration not only hindered the early phases of filming but also ultimately affected its content (what could be shown) and contexts of reception (where it could be shown). Close examination of the cuts mandated by censors in the U.S. helps to illuminate how McCarthy-era fears about foreign infiltration, not to mention ongoing concerns about how to represent racial crises, clashed, on the one hand, with Wright's ambition to bring Bigger to the movies through the unusual route of Argentine studios, and, on the other hand, with the Argentine film industry's own ambitions, which found in this story, and the critique of U.S. race relations associated with it, an improbable vehicle upon which to stake its aspirations for an international audience.

Not only did the film adaptation's handling of race relations pose a problem for U.S. censors, who mandated extensive cuts that may have sabotaged *Sangre Negra's* narrative coherence, but this handling also had unexpected, if unacknowledged, resonances for race relations within Argentina. Wright's ultimately failed foray into filmmaking offers a fruitful opportunity to explore film's potential as a medium of dissent for dis-

parate producers and audiences from the U.S. and Argentina alike, who fleetingly found, or thought they found, in the cinematic projection of Bigger's story the potential realization, in turn, of their own dreams for national recognition among global spectators. That these dreams found visual expression in the story of African American protest is deeply ironic, considering the shadow cast by the specter of Argentina's own fraught racial history. In this article, I argue that not only was the adaptation an attempt for Wright to find, in film, a form appropriate for protest, it also offered for the Argentine film industry the hope, however faint and unreflectively ironic of the unresolved issue of Afro-Argentine identity, of reviving a flagging national cinema.

“Monstrous!”: Race and the Censoring of *Native Son*

An early glimpse of film's appeal for Richard Wright can be found, aptly, in the very novel he sought to adapt. Bigger Thomas's desire for the movies is so unmistakable that in a key section of *Native Son*, not only does he steal money to enter the theater, he and his friend Gus masturbate before the films *Trader Horn* and *The Gay Woman* are shown. In a context of de jure segregation, the movies represent a forbidden site, where, as Jacqueline Stewart observes, nothing less is at stake than black spectatorship—who looks, who is looked at, and how one looks—as a fraught identificatory process.⁴ This is a theme that Wright also underscored in an essay explaining the inspiration for Bigger. While “How Bigger Was Born” introduces a number of models for his most famous creation, the figure he calls Bigger No. 3 provides specific context for Wright's approach to film.⁵ This figure defies Jim Crow strictures which deny him entrance to the theater by going there anyway. Indeed, the importance of this defiance is also highlighted by Bigger's description in *Native Son*. “I'm polishing my nightstick,” he tells Gus, his euphemism revealing the extent to which the instrument of his pleasure is inextricable from the instrument of force, wielded by police, that subsequently threatens to punish him for that pleasure.⁶ Moreover, although it may be tempting to interpret Bigger's pleasure as a response to the screening of the film *The Gay Woman* featuring Mary Dalton, it is important to remember that he experiences his pleasure prior to this projection of white womanhood. Rather than being wholly fixed on the erotically unattainable body of a white woman, Bigger's pleasure here, Wright implies, is directed primarily toward the darkened space of the theater, and secondarily to Gus, his appreciative audience and fellow participant. In these moments the screen is a black void, and Bigger responds in expectation of the filling of that void. In fulfilling a need as pressing as shelter and food, the episode suggests that the sheer physicality of Big-

ger and his friend takes shape in this expectant moment of blackness. Their crudely defiant assertion of presence gestures toward a momentary and ultimately futile transformation of the darkness of the theater and the blankness of the screen.

Richard Wright also hungered for movies. However, like his famous character—indeed like so many aspiring black filmmakers after him—Wright encountered numerous obstacles.⁷ Although Wright sought opportunities to adapt his best-selling novel soon after it was published, many years elapsed before his screen version debuted in the U.S., Latin America, and Europe. Wright's personal interest in film is evident in his correspondence with the pioneer of documentary film, John Grierson. In the 1940s, Wright even applied for a position as writer for the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada, then headed by Grierson, noting that "after hearing of the work of the NFB, I thought that my past work would qualify me for such a position."⁸ According to biographer Michael Fabre, there was tremendous interest in adapting *Native Son*.⁹ However, early offers were unacceptable because they insisted on making Bigger a white man, a transformation that would, in ostensibly universalizing (or rather whitening) the story of a struggle for manhood, have effectively erased the significance of race for that struggle. Wright persisted despite such early "Burbanking" pressures, Elizabeth Binggeli's phrase for the efforts of studios to whiten black narratives.¹⁰

An important first step toward visualizing Bigger's plight, Wright's 1941 folk history, entitled *12 Million Black Voices*, emphasized its sociological dimensions. In this collaboration with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographer and photo editor Edwin Rosskam, Wright provided a documentary context for the conditions that trap Bigger Thomas. A stage adaptation of *Native Son* quickly followed. Directed by Orson Welles and starring Canada Lee, it opened in New York in 1941 to overwhelmingly positive reviews. Wright's cinematic ambitions, however, were stymied, and in his correspondence with Columbia Pictures he complained that U.S. production companies refused to back him, possibly because the material, with its leftist sympathies, was incendiary during the McCarthy period. Especially controversial would have been the prominence of Jan, the labor organizer who was called "Red" by his detractors, and Max, the lawyer whose impassioned advocacy of Bigger also involved a defense of Marxist principles, which would have made it easy to label as communist propaganda.

Over a decade would pass before Wright's dream of a film adaptation of *Native Son* would come to fruition. Distributed in Latin America and Europe as *Sangre Negra*,¹¹ the film adaptation of *Native Son* was a coproduction, as noted earlier, involving French director Pierre Chenal, with financial backing by Atilio Mentasti of Sono Film, Argentina's oldest and most influential

film company, and featuring Richard Wright, French exile, working over-time as screenwriter and lead actor. The contract, which was later disputed, stipulated that Wright was to receive \$6,000 and one-sixth of the profits from the film. Michael Fabre explains that the business deal between the partners was necessarily convoluted in order to avoid taxation by the Peron government, which, though it supported national cinema by imposing protectionist exhibition quotas and ensuring availability of reels for filming, nonetheless hindered film production through its corrupt bureaucracy.¹² Joining this unlikely crew was an equally improbable ensemble of untested actors. Bessie was played by Gloria Madison, a student at the University of Chicago whom Wright discovered while shooting exterior scenes on location. Jean Wallace performed the role of Mary Dalton, Nicholas Joy played Mr. Dalton, and local amateurs from Buenos Aires, whose voices were subsequently dubbed in English, rounded out the cast.

Traveling with some fanfare on board the S.S. Paraguay, Wright embarked on this coproduction with high hopes for a profitable adventure. Though in some interviews Wright credits Chenal with the decision to cast him as the “native son,” other interviews and biographies suggest that Canada Lee had originally been cast in the lead role, but was unable to star due to scheduling conflicts. What is certain, however, is that with the role came substantial challenges. Wright was twenty years older than Bigger, and had to drop his weight from 180 to 145 pounds for the part. Undaunted by the physical difficulties the role presented, Wright appeared likewise unfazed by the largest hindrance of all: by his own account, he had never before acted. Despite his bravado, in an essay prepared for the Buenos Aires-based journal *The Bulletin Board*, Wright characterizes the challenge to balance conflicting responsibilities as “monstrous” because “[c]ensorship looms [in] back of each move of the mind on the movie set; a vast unseen audience of millions whose lives you do not know will see what you are doing.”¹³ In the same candid essay, Wright presciently reveals that he staked Bigger’s cinematic debut upon the whims of forces he could not control, but upon which he depended. It was a powerlessness to which he submitted only because the project seemed a worthwhile risk, even as he acknowledged that part of the risk meant acceding to inevitable censoring pressures. While, in this excerpt, the threat of censorship appears to loom abstractly, as an expectation that Wright anticipates and strives in his performance to meet, it would inevitably confront him in more concrete ways, limiting the force of his critique of race.

The first sign of its impact was obvious: unlike the phenomenal success of the novel, the film was a box-office bomb. The *New York Times* declared it a “sincere but strangely unconvincing film,”¹⁴ and the *Christian Science Monitor* noted damningly that, “As the criminally rebellious but,



Promotion photos by Segovia of the film *Native Son*.

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as he is presented on the screen, invisibly motivated Bigger Thomas, Mr. Wright not only fails to achieve sympathy and understanding for the special and very real problems of his race, but renders them slightly absurd, with the peculiar, pompous, artificial absurdity of old-fashioned, high-falutin melodrama.”¹⁵ To be fair, the attacks on the amateurish acting and poor production quality were, to a large degree, justified. But while censorship alone could not explain weak performances, it considerably shaped what this audience ultimately saw, or rather, failed to see. To the extent that censorship affected the form and content of the film, upon which many of the critics focused their sharpest attacks, it accounts for at least part of its failed critical reception in the U.S.

Indeed, Chenal lamented that the film seen in the U.S. was not the one made by this unique coproduction and certainly was not the same one screened in Argentina and selected European countries such as Italy and Spain. In a July 29, 1951, letter to Wright, Chenal reflected, “On leur a en effet presente une version parfaitement massacree du film et ils ont le droit de ne juger que ce qu'on leur monte.” (“We presented a perfectly massacred version of the film and they have the right to review it.”¹⁶) So ruthlessly had the film been cut that from its original running time of 112 minutes, only eighty-eight minutes remained; likewise, from 3,000 meters of film, only 2,200 meters remained. As Ruth Elizabeth Burke notes, the film suffered in form and content due to pressure from censors.¹⁷

To appreciate how persistently censorship affected the varied representations of Bigger Thomas and specifically related to the reception of *Sangre Negra*, it is necessary to consider the implications of Wright's initial encounter with the issue. Indeed, the obstacles he confronted in bringing Bigger to film were by no means the first he faced. Bringing Bigger to print was itself a fraught undertaking, which ensured that the first edition of this debut novel was heavily abridged. Notably, the scene that was excised from the 1940 version centers on the symbolically violent expression of black male sexuality, the masturbation scene at the movie theater.

In the first and still reissued abridged edition, this charged scene is significantly altered. While Gus and Bigger are described watching movies in the theater, excised is any sign of defiance beyond their sheer presence in that space, any hint that their desire for, and pleasure in, viewing might be sexual in nature. Hysteria over the threat of black male desire is expressed in the denial of desire altogether. This omission is tantamount to censorship or rather self-censorship, insofar as Wright approved and even made the cuts himself on the advice of his publisher. As importantly, it ironically serves to carry out the threat of punishment evident in the unexpurgated version. By removing the source as well as the fact of sexual pleasure from the scene of screen spectatorship, Wright does what the theater manager and prosecutor only threaten to do. The excision confirms the validity of what Barbara Johnson calls in a different context, a “misreading” of the scene,¹⁸ in its tacit acknowledgement of the connection between Bigger's pleasure and the image of Mary's body, despite the temporal disconnection between these two events. After all, Bigger's pleasure is expressed in advance, and thus not directly because of, the projection of *The Gay Woman*. Unwittingly or not, through this form of editorial violence, Wright denies Bigger and Gus, thereby symbolically punishing them for, the pleasure of looking at a white woman, even though their physical pleasure is not explicitly linked to their viewing pleasure.

According to the Motion Picture Production Code in effect at the time,

the representation of sex was specifically required to affirm “the sanctity of marriage and the home.”¹⁹ Given the strictness of the guidelines, which decreed that scenes of passion were not to be “base” or “excessive,” there was no question that the masturbation scene, which barely found its way into print, would be projected on-screen. Instead, Bigger’s desire finds its most explicit expression in Wright’s film in a kiss with Mary—a kiss that would nonetheless have been just as shocking and explicit as the novel’s representation of black male sexuality. This kiss, however, did not make the cut, and though a still photo hints at what the final form might have been, the film itself had to settle for the image of Bigger supporting a drunken Mary to hint at this forbidden physical intimacy. Indeed, it can hardly come as a surprise that this was one of several scenes cut from the version distributed and shown in the U.S., where again the code was stern when it came to interracial desire: “*miscegenation* (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden.”²⁰ In addition to the kiss, the version of *Sangre Negra* shown in the U.S. cut such potentially incendiary scenes as: (1) depictions of the violent killing of the rat; (2) Bigger’s construction of a homemade gun; and (3) Max’s forceful courtroom speech. In other words, any sign of socialist sympathy and especially of black male sexuality, which for the censors appeared tantamount to its violent eruption, was cut from the film. The relationship between the cut scenes to the novel—and the extent to which the film adaptation is a faithful representation of *Native Son*—can only be a matter of speculation, since, to my knowledge, an uncut version for comparison is unavailable. Narrative liberties were indeed taken in the film adaptation, perhaps the most obvious being Bigger’s excursion with Bessie to a theme park, a scene which establishes the relationship between the two characters as loving in order to underscore the subsequent viciousness of the latter’s murder. Moreover, the content of these uncut scenes can only be gleaned through indirect sources such as the correspondence between Wright and his collaborators and from film reviews. It is certain that cuts were made that did not necessarily reflect the film’s departure from the novel (as such departures took other forms also), but rather resulted from censorship pressures.

Despite these drastic concessions, some states such as Ohio nonetheless attempted to ban the film. In fact, Ohio refused three times to grant the distributor, Classic Pictures, a permit for exhibiting the film, explaining its decision on the grounds that the film “contributes to racial misunderstanding, presenting situations undesirable to the mutual interests of both races; [goes] against public interests in undermining confidence that justice can be carried out, [and] presents racial frictions at a time when all groups should be united against everything that is subversive.”²¹ The Kansas Board of Review examined the film on September 5, 1951. Records note



Promotion photos by Segovia of the film *Native Son*.

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that the feature was “disapproved in full because [the] picture degrades both colored and White races.”²² Though the nature of this degradation was not specified, and no “eliminations” (or cuts) were listed, we can deduce, based on the scenes that were removed, that some of it stemmed from the on-screen suggestion of mixing “colored and White races.”

The key term in the court document is clearly *subversive*. While the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces this term to the sixteenth century, when it described revolutionary activities, in the context of twentieth-century American usage it frequently denotes cold war paranoia about communist infiltration. Indeed, the committee charged with detecting, exposing, and handling this threat was called the Subversive Activities Board. Established in 1950, it was the organization chiefly responsible for managing the so-called red scare, and the shadow cast by its mandate would, in the context of the 1951 reception of *Sangre Negra*, have been keenly felt. The removal of any signs of interracial desire and the articulation of a socialist defense of forceful black male subjectivity suggest that a key source of the film’s subversive qualities was the threat of a putatively foreign sexuality penetrating the political and moral purity of McCarthy-era America.

Though Classic Pictures eventually appealed, the Supreme Court of Ohio upheld the lower courts’ decision, writing in its opinion that, despite

recent cases which, as Dawn B. Sova notes in her overview of film censorship in the U.S., left only obscenity as a legitimate basis for banning film, “there remained a limited field in which decency and morals may be protected from the impact of an offending motion picture film by prior restraint under proper criteria.”²³ The kiss between Mary and Bigger, was, for the film at least, tantamount to the kiss of death. The U.S. Supreme Court overruled in a decision that also overturned the denial of permits to other controversial films, concluding that the Ohio motion picture censorship statute was “unconstitutionally vague and indefinite, and contrary to the requirements of the First Amendment due process, insofar as it authorized the censorship of films believed to be harmful or conducive to immorality or crime.”²⁴ Despite this final court-granted relief, given persistent ideological and political objections, there should be little wonder that the film was barely screened at all. The legal battles and artistic compromises had clearly taken their toll. Combined with the formal deficiencies that afflicted the production, *Sangre Negra* stood little chance with audiences and critics in the U.S. Though they were willing to read about racial protest, they remained, it seemed, unreceptive to viewing such a narrative.

Bigger in Buenos Aires

The troubling scenes that so disturbed members of the Kansas Board of Review and the Department of Education in Ohio did not alarm audiences and critics in Buenos Aires. Presumably, part of the positive reception of the film there is attributable to its form: though to my knowledge unexpurgated copies of the film are unavailable, correspondence between Chenal and Wright suggests that the version shown in Argentina was uncut. However striking the differences were between these versions, alone they do not fully account for the sharply divided responses to *Sangre Negra*. While the film’s harsh dismissal in the U.S. is understandable within the context of McCarthy-era codes of morality, its enthusiastic reception in Latin America remains puzzling.

After all, the film upholds the novel’s emphasis on Chicago as the site and source of Bigger’s predicament, as, in effect, a crucial character in its own right. Notably, to highlight the significance of Chicago for *Sangre Negra*, Wright includes in his notes for the screenplay an ode to the city, to be spoken in a breathless voice-over in the film, and ultimately revealed as Max’s.

“Chicago!” he cries, “[a] young giant among the world’s great cities—a city poets have sung about—It was Carl Sandburg who called Chicago: the Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads, the Nation’s Freight Handler, City of the Big Shoulders.” The film’s

conception, it appears, would be unthinkable without conjuring the image of Chicago. References to America also recur frequently in the screenplay's various drafts. Scenes, for example, take place on a "typical street on the Black Belt on Chicago's Southside" or on an "empty lot typical of America."²⁵ In Wright's ambitions for this adaptation, Bigger's predicament is explained as the problem of America, or Chicago writ large—where America, of course, refers to the U.S., not to Latin America. What was at stake, then, in this coproduction?

Although no obvious Argentine markers are visible in the film, the duality of Chicago's representation is nonetheless faintly discernible. A spatial division between the interior views of Chicago (which were shot in studios in Buenos Aires) and the exterior spaces of the city (shot on location in Chicago itself) offer subtle visual cues about the relationship between these two sites, the connection between Buenos Aires and Chicago. Moreover, this spatial division is not just horizontally but also vertically configured, delineated, that is, as a juxtaposition between inside and outside, and up and down. In two key sequences, for instance, Bigger descends into the monstrous depths of humanity. His passage to a basement space symbolizes his moral degradation. In the first, he bears Mary's body, and in the second (after passing up and down ominous-looking staircases in an abandoned tenement building with his girlfriend) he hurls Bessie's body into an elevator shaft. Such spatial juxtapositions might appear to screen obliquely, or represent without seeming to, Buenos Aires, revealing that which the film could not fully conceal, its multiple sites of location. Put simply, although the narrative of *Sangre Negra* is firmly located in Chicago, the spatial division between interior and exterior spaces, between above- and below-ground sites, can be seen as indirect reminders of Buenos Aires's importance for this narrative. In turn, they tentatively evoke a spatial linkage between the America of *Native Son* and the Latin America symbolized by Argentina.

We can readily understand the practical reasons that Wright should settle upon Buenos Aires for shooting interior scenes. Though his preference presumably would have been for on-location filming in Chicago throughout, he had little choice, given the opposition his project faced in the U.S. An additional reason is implied in an undated interview with French intellectual Roland Barthes, in which Wright includes Argentina among his international travels as part of a broadening experience that helped him cast the question of race within a wider context. "It is true that in my early work I was almost wholly concerned with the reactions of Negroes to the white environment that pressed in upon them," Wright explained. "Having left America and having been living for some time in France, I have become concerned about the historical roots and the emo-



Promotion photos by Segovia of the film *Native Son*.

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tional problems of Western whites which make them aggressive toward colonial peoples. You can see from this that my travels in to the Argentine, into Africa and Asia even have an autobiographical inspiration. I was looking for explanations of the psychological reactions of whites.”²⁶ Motivated chiefly by practical incentives, his comment hints at an attempt to incorporate the figure of “Argentina,” and implicitly, the most prominent aspect of this figure for Wright, *Sangre Negra*, within a career that spanned diverse genres and disparate sites. Though I hesitate to conclude that Wright’s partnership with Argentine film producers was motivated by what, for lack of a better term, might be described as still developing international tendencies—his attempt, in other words, to grasp the roots and far-reaching tentacles of European imperialism as a way of explaining the specifics of race relations as a legacy of those forces—this interview implies that Argentina, incorporated within a broader range of travel experiences formative of a racial consciousness of the far-reaching effects of U.S. and European colonialism, eventually held such resonances for him.²⁷

Less clear, however, is why Sono Film would have selected the story of Bigger Thomas as a means of ensuring continued international distribution. While Chenal provides an obvious link—he had already directed films in Argentina when he sought refuge there from the Nazi occupation of France during World War Two—his ties to this national film industry

do not wholly explain the appeal of Bigger Thomas's story for this audience. In other words, what did *Native Son* mean for moviegoers outside the U.S. and specifically for the Argentine filmmakers who sought symbolic affiliations with Bigger's story?

The socialist class analysis pivotal to *Native Son*, and made explicit in Max's courtroom speech, might have had resonances for the recent class struggles in Argentina in which Peron had mobilized labor unions and the working classes more broadly in his rise to power against the rightist dictatorships of the 1930s and early 1940s. Moreover, by the time of *Sangre Negra*'s filming, Argentine cinema was in such rapid decline from its Golden Age in the 1930s that the Peron government had, as noted earlier, instituted protectionist exhibition policies that ensured a domestic audience for national films.²⁸ Such policies also sought to branch out and re-establish an international audience as well. Although Argentina formerly dominated the film industry in South America and represented an appealing market for Hollywood productions, sales of "local" Argentine films were subsequently eclipsed by Mexican-made movies. Though the reasons for this decline are complex, two important factors stand out. First, Argentina's neutrality during the Second World War raised ultimately unsubstantiated fears in the U.S. that Argentine studios would release Axis-sympathetic films. Second, its attractiveness as a market for U.S. films led to retaliatory action against previous generations of protectionist measures including censorship of these cultural exports. The U.S. blocked shipment of reels required for filming, effectively crippling many studios by cutting off their required equipment. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the damage had been done. By 1949, Sono Film was the only production company still able to claim a tentative foothold in overseas markets.²⁹ Nonetheless, along with other less established studios, Sono still struggled to find its place, and an audience, beyond the parochial boundaries of Peron's patronage.

While an extensive investigation of the history of Argentine cinema is beyond the scope of this article, the relevant issue for understanding the context for the adaptation and, perhaps more appropriately adoption, of *Native Son*, is the connection between this foreign film industry on the one hand, and the native or local narrative on the other hand. Besides a subtly symbolic spatial linkage between the America of *Native Son* and the Latin America of *Sangre Negra*, whose faint outlines I have attempted to trace, another crucial connection is suggested linguistically. For it could be said that Richard Wright did not bring *Native Son* to the big screen, but rather "Sangre Negra," and this translation further discloses the multiple locations which explicit pointers to Chicago could not wholly eradicate.

After all, *Sangre Negra* is an unusual translation of *Native Son*. Other translations of the title sought to preserve the pivotal thematic sense of fil-

ial nativity. In Germany, Wright's novel appeared as *Sohn dieses Landes* and, in France, was published as *Un Enfant du Pays*. By contrast, *Sangre Negra*, literally "black blood," arguably retained neither thematic resonance which the specific spatial markers in the film and screenplay so obviously insisted upon. Instead, the evocation of a biological sensibility offers a more universalized account of Bigger's plight. Whereas Chicago is represented through image and sound, the only cues to the native son's "American" nonnative status are the title and, in some versions, its Spanish subtitles.³⁰ Though the film was shot in English or, when necessary (as was the case when Spanish-speaking extras were featured) dubbed in English, and accompanied by Spanish subtitles, the dialogue was not perceived as foreign to Spanish-speaking Argentina. In fact, the duality between the film's spoken English and Spanish subtitles was seized upon as a distinction lending credibility to a "native" film industry. One anonymous reviewer writing for the Buenos Aires paper *Variety*, notes that the production is "[h]eralded as Argentina's first English-spoken film."³¹ Far from appearing (or sounding) foreign to Argentines, the film was proudly embraced by many (who spoke and understood English also) as a national and therefore "native" production. In other words, the translation shifts the otherwise firmly fixed location suggested in the novel *Native Son* back toward its other scene, Buenos Aires, by drawing attention to differences in language, so that the relationship between foreign and native tongue is by no means obvious. However subtly, the unorthodox title sought affinities with Bigger's story as well as affirming, however indirectly, connections to his struggle for voice and visibility. To this extent, *Sangre Negra* can be seen to recast *Native Son* as a story of nationalistic struggle.

As the translation suggests, *Sangre Negra* did not just satisfy Wright's ambitions for *Native Son*. Another, perhaps equally monumental, ambition was served, as Argentina's still developing film industry sought to ride the coattails of material that had, in the literary world at least, secured an appreciative audience. Additionally, as one reviewer of the film notes, racial themes at the time generally garnered large audiences when represented on film. Even though in staging, direction, and dialogue *Sangre Negra* remained rooted within the sensibilities of urban corruption which was at the core of the novel's naturalist explanation of Bigger Thomas, the film thus offered a tenuous link to struggles beyond Chicago. Signaled in the generalizing and arguably universalizing translation of the title *Sangre Negra*, in the strong, national support for the production, as well as in enthusiastic reviews, the film was touted as "native" to Argentina, part of the nation's struggle to be "seen" and "read" internationally, to enter, in other words, the international scene as a serious filmmaking country.

Despite the alternately subtle (through translation) and effusive (through

critical reception) manner in which the story of Bigger's plight was adopted as native, not all were convinced that this production was the appropriate vehicle for achieving the ambitions of Argentina's film industry. Though one reviewer reveals that "Sono Films [sic] hopes this production, if exhibited in the U.S. and other English language countries, will focus attention on Argentina as a film-producing country,"³² this claim is immediately qualified: despite being "made expressly for distribution abroad, about all that Argentina can authentically claim for the film was that Jaime Prades was responsible for the production and that an Argentine studio leased facilities for and helped finance its making."³³ *Variety* speculated that if the nation's filmmaking aspirations were quashed, it would likely be because its hopes had been pinned upon material that would never have received a sympathetic audience in the U.S. Its reviewer reflected that, "It is rather sad that a number of British and U.S. residents in Argentina should have been enticed into collaborating in this underhand stab at the U.S. What is most surprising is that Pierre Chenal, who professed to abhor communism and to love the U.S. (trying to obtain a visa to work there), would have directed this picture, and so slanted it, by touches of exaggeration or caricature, as to give Richard Wright's message against racial intolerance plenty of anti-U.S. twist."³⁴ Even though censorship did not, from all accounts, directly affect the content and context of *Sangre Negra's* circulation and reception within Argentina, it did, this reviewer worries, affect the subsequent circulation and reception of an Argentine film in the U.S. And not only this particular film, but also potentially the industry as a whole. Thus indirectly, U.S. censorship, which the reviewer interpreted as focused on the anti-U.S. subtext, was perceived to have devastated hopes for the film's success—a success that would, it was further hoped, have helped pave the way for additional sales abroad. Yet the source of this "anti-U.S. twist" is uncertain.

One possible explanation for the anti-U.S. subtext is suggested by the brief historical overview outlined here. Given the clash between Argentine cinema and U.S. studios revolving around political issues (Axis versus Allied alignments during the Second World War) and competition for markets in Latin America (the scramble for which involved the imposition of quota systems and application of censorship restrictions against U.S. productions), this subtext would have been an unwelcome reminder of precisely the past from which Sono Film—and Argentine cinema as a whole—sought to recover. While Argentina's film aspirations found surprising commonalities with Wright's struggle to bring Bigger to the movies, this unlikely sympathy was thus riven from the outset with rivalry, suspicion, and fundamental misunderstanding.

The reviewer's remarks, however, highlight that while Chenal's previously suppressed socialist sympathies are insinuated as a source of concern

for American viewers, the issue of race is raised in passing, only to be quickly dropped. The film's representation of race relations was only troubling, it seemed, because its message of tolerance was undermined by an ostensible commitment to communism, not because it served in itself as a critique of race. In dissociating communism from race relations, attributing the anti-U.S. message to the former feature, connecting, it arguably follows, a pro-U.S. message with the latter feature, the reviewer departed sharply from the American reception of the adaptation, which made no such fine distinctions. For American audiences and reviewers, race and class were part and parcel of an unmistakably political—not to mention unpopular—indictment of inequality. That these issues should be completely separate for the Argentine reviewer reveals a fascinating perspective on race relations, not just as envisioned for Americans, but for Argentines also.

Besides the historical context of Argentine filmmaking, in which competition with the U.S. film industry was clearly held by protectionists within an anti-U.S. framework, the twist alluded to by the reviewer can be seen, then, to refer to the obvious issue at the heart of Wright's narrative: the sensitive question of race relations within the U.S. Indeed, though it is tempting to connect Wright's filmmaking aspirations with that of Sono Film in terms of class struggle, or international socialism, few remarked on this aspect of *Sangre Negra*, instead focusing on the putative advantages of addressing the theme of race for the U.S. context solely as a means of engaging audiences beyond Latin America while leaving unasked questions of race relations within Argentina. Indeed, this emphasis on anti-U.S. sentiment deflected a possibly deeper affinity between *Bigger* Thomas and this new site of adoption/adaptation. Although Argentine audiences and reviewers might have been eager to identify explicitly with *Bigger* as the underdog challenging forces greater than himself, remarkably they seem to have missed the fact that some of these very forces were at work not just in Chicago but also in Buenos Aires itself. Symbolic affiliations based on class identifications break down when it comes to racial cross-connections. For the Argentines, it would appear that while class oppression might be universally felt—at the very least they understood what it was like to be bullied by a mightier American film industry—race was a problem to be reconciled within Chicago, but not in Buenos Aires. While sympathetic to the African American struggle of racial oppression, Argentine audiences and reviewers stopped short of reflecting upon the resonances of this struggle with race relations within their own society. If *Sangre Negra* broaches the subject of Afro-Latin American identity, it does so in only the most oblique, largely overlooked, way. Nonetheless, in the move from “native son” to “black blood,” the Argentine producers not only gestured toward the nativeness of the narrative (affiliations with struggle in terms of

class), but also evoked racial divisions in Argentina, which, though muted, were discernible in the 1950s.³⁵

As historians have observed, the whitening of Argentina began in the nineteenth century as a self-conscious effort to modernize, where modernization was explicitly defined as a Europeanizing program in the wake of claims, made by influential race theorists such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, that a multitude of Latin American problems were caused by black and indigenous groups. As George Reid Andrews puts it, “Scientific racism was immediately enhanced by turn-of-the-century elites confronting the challenge of how to transform their ‘backward,’ underdeveloped nations into modern, ‘civilized’ republics. Such a transformation, they concluded, would have to be racial as well. In order to be civilized, Latin America would have to become white.”³⁶ A solution, perhaps more effective in Argentina than anywhere else in Latin America, was to outnumber these groups and, from the 1880s well into the 1940s, a huge influx of European immigrants was welcomed to Argentina. In fact, by the end of the nineteenth century, Afro-Argentines were, in Gino Germano’s evocative phrase, “vanishing,” so that the immigration policy proved “effective in marginalizing blacks and Indigenous populations.”³⁷ That blackness should be missed in the early 1950s, on the heels of this process of whitening and deliberate efforts to erase blackness, is hardly surprising. Even today in Latin America, racism is condemned by politicians, who nonetheless maintain that its attendant ills afflict other countries. Argentines’ inability to understand how Bigger’s blackness might resonate as a source of national identification is symptomatic of a tendency on the part of Latin America more generally, as Ariel E. Dulitsky has cogently argued, to overlook the ways that race relations within the continent are also vexed by the predicament that politicians so readily diagnose for other nations yet stubbornly overlook within their own.³⁸

Although Argentina’s ambitious immigration program was particularly effective in its early decades, so that at one stage the foreign-born population outnumbered the native-born, it did not, of course, result in a wholly homogeneous nation. However overlooked as a pressing issue for Argentines, Bigger’s racial struggle was literally cast within a context where blackness nevertheless was of considerable relevance. The very presence of black extras within *Sangre Negra* serves at the very least as a reminder of the heterogeneity of Buenos Aires. Moreover, the blackness of this film adaptation was not just an effect of Wright’s concern with a specifically Chicagoan predicament. The availability of black bodies to inhabit the diegetic space evoked within the film can be seen, then, as an indirect admission of blackness to *Sangre Negra*’s other, equally important site, Buenos Aires. If this message of potential solidarity was unheard, no wonder: the extras did not speak in their own voice. And yet that these extras’ voices were later dubbed, so that the Spanish

they spoke was heard as English, suggests how Afro-Latin American subjectivity might inform what seems, at first glance at least, to be a narrative about the significance of race relations for African Americans. That this was missed among reviewers in Buenos Aires, in turn, speaks volumes about racial identity in Argentina.

While the nation may consider itself white, this identification is clearly political and cultural, dependent upon not just normalizing whiteness as a “human” rather than a racial attribute of identity, but also upon rendering invisible groups that might undermine this claim toward whiteness. Indeed, in explicitly defining itself as white, Argentina’s stand on race-relations was unambiguous. Another way of approaching the issue of race for Argentina is suggested by Andrews, who maintains that, regardless of such whitening policies, several historical conditions underscore the significance of racial difference for those who could not help being daily reminded of it. As Andrews puts it, “Whether majority or minority . . . the black presence marks a specific historical experience shared by almost all societies of Afro-Latin America: the experience of plantation agriculture and African slavery . . . requires them to define their relationship to ‘blackness,’ the most visible and obvious indicator of low social status.”³⁹ However different the experiences of the black diaspora might be within Argentina compared with that within the U.S., this collective memory of slavery and plantation life nonetheless had commonalities. Such a memory is perhaps most clearly evoked in a dream sequence in *Sangre Negra*, which appears nowhere in *Native Son*. Addressing Max, Bigger explains that he was compelled to kill Bessie because of a dream. In this dream, he attempts to hide his incriminating evidence, a white bundle containing Mary’s head, in a pile of coal. Seeing his dilemma, Bessie urges Bigger to hide the bundle in the cotton field, which would, she reasons, provide better camouflage. Moving desperately from coal to cotton, Bigger is transported from the city to the country, from the north of his constrained development to the south of Wright’s own formative experiences. This nightmare return to the south underscores the plantation past as the site of beginning and end, where the cash crop of cotton, for all its whiteness, cannot hide Bigger’s bundle. The dream establishes a strict binary between black and white so that the total blackness of the coal only exposes more clearly the whiteness of the bundle. In this regard, blackness offers no refuge. Nor, however, does the near blinding whiteness of the cotton field shield the black fugitive, because the rigid plantation economy that the sequence references can only favor white owners, not black workers. Despite shifting from the black coal of the north to the white cotton of the south, between the fuel of industrial urbanization to the material associated with agrarian development, the black subject is caught. The dream’s evocation of a binary division between white and black turns out, then, to be misleading: there is no tension between



Promotion photos by Segovia of the film *Native Son*.

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these two terms, as the former exercises irrevocable power over the latter. Indeed, the plantation South that the dream sequence references is a symbolic site that most visibly evokes the collective memory of plantation life, an important basis of reckoning with a shared “relationship to blackness,” one which is marked, at this moment, by its invisibility amid the blinding totality of whiteness. This shared memory tentatively gestures toward a potential yet ultimately unrealized affinity between African American and Afro-Latin American racialization within *Sangre Negra*.

For all its flaws and failures, this film adaptation stands as more than a curiosity in the history of two struggling film traditions. Though a meaningful adaptation of *Native Son* has yet to be made, *Sangre Negra* nevertheless encodes intriguing meanings for reviewers who wrestled with its negotiations with race and class in the U.S. and Argentina. The “monstrous” *Sangre Negra* suggests an unexpected alignment between the interests of a crippled national film industry in South America and Wright’s own commitment to representing African Americans in film. Nonetheless, it was in this strange undertaking that potential connections between Argentine cinema and an international sensibility could be grasped. Through the diegetic and extradiegetic negotiations of space, the story of Bigger Thomas, which in the novel had been firmly rooted within Chicago, became rerouted as a transnational process of coproduction. In this manner, the *local* specificity of the novel

shifts, in its film adaptation, to impart instead a subtext of *dislocation*, in which the juxtaposition of interior and exterior, above ground and in subterranean spaces, serves as a subtle visual hint of the multiple sites which are a constitutive condition of the process of translating *Native Son* to *Sangre Negra*. Not only was the space of Chicago crucial to the formation of racial identity in *Sangre Negra*, the setting of Buenos Aires—with its own fraught history of racial oppression—provides an even more nuanced perspective on the theme than had been presented in *Native Son*. If Wright exposed himself by assenting to perform these varied roles, and to bear the burden of these manifold responsibilities, then surely the nascent Argentine industry, which staked its ambitions to that of Wright and the story of *Bigger Thomas* was no less daring, finding in this unlikely antihero a seemingly apt figure heralding a new era of international acclaim. It is with a huge degree of irony that Sono Film would declare bankruptcy, corruption, mismanagement, and immense misunderstanding contributing to the venture's failure. *Sangre Negra* was ultimately yet another film few had seen and even fewer would remember, and it was not until the 1960s, with the advent of auteur productions as part of new wave filmmaking and the development of a third world cinema, that a resurgence of Argentine cinema gained traction.

Moreover, given Richard Wright's own condition of exile, into which he had settled by the time of the film adaptation's release, it is perhaps only appropriate that the project served as a symptom of sorts for the dislocations of its primary supporter. Furthermore, given its links between two sites, between America (the U.S.) and Argentina (Latin America), *Sangre Negra* might be considered a bridging text that straddles two moments of Wright's lengthy career. Tracing its origins to an early literary triumph clearly located within the U.S. which shadows and informs its subsequent visual revisions of this triumph that destabilizes this American site, *Sangre Negra* serves as a symbolic tie in the development of a race consciousness that turned, for Wright, from a local to an increasingly comparative, indeed, global, focus. This shift in focus is arguably foreshadowed in the adaptation's spatial negotiations, and it is perhaps fitting that only three years later, in 1954, he traveled to Africa; his report, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, appeared shortly afterward.⁴⁰ Here Wright picked up the question of race relations, in ways that Paul Gilroy has famously foregrounded,⁴¹ as the "routes" of his travels intersected with the his ancestral "roots" in Africa.

Notes

1. See, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah, "A Long Way from Home: Richard Wright in the Gold Coast," in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 188–201, and Houston A. Baker,

“Richard Wright and the Dynamics of Place in Afro-American Literature,” in *New Essays on Native Son*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 85–116.

2. *Sangre Negra*, dir. by Pierre Chenal (Buenos Aires: Sono Film, 1951).

3. Few have commented on the significance of this adaptation. One interesting discussion is provided by Raphael Lambert, “From Page to Screen: A Comparative Study of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Its Two Film Adaptations,” <http://www.cmh.h.kyoto-u.ac.jp/CMN7/lambert.html> (accessed July 8, 2009).

4. Jacqueline Stewart, “Negroes Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Modern Urbanity,” *Critical Inquiry* 29A (2003): 650–77.

5. Richard Wright, *How “Bigger” Was Born: The Story of Native Son* (New York: Harper, 1940).

6. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper, 1940), 30.

7. Historically, the movie theater has been a fraught space for African Americans, whose presence in that space is restricted in several ways: pejoratively portrayed on-screen, they have also frequently been prevented from watching these performances altogether. See, for example, James Snead, *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side* (London: Routledge, 1994); Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993).

8. Richard Wright to John Grierson, n.d., Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

9. See Michael Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun (New York: W.W. Morrow, 1963). In 1986, another adaptation of the novel was released, also to dismal reviews. *Native Son*, dir. by Jerold Freedman (New York: American Playhouse, 1986).

10. Elizabeth Binggeli, “Burbanking Bigger and Bette the Bitch,” *African American Review* 40, no. 3 (2006): 475–92.

11. Though it was distributed in the U.S. under the more familiar title, *Native Son*, I refer to the film adaptation of the novel throughout this essay as *Sangre Negra* to highlight the vexed conditions of its production and its foreignness—qualities that would, in turn, be highlighted in its American reception.

12. However, Prades removed important details in the Spanish translation and Wright’s master copy was stolen from his hotel room. Mutual suspicion led to extreme measures such as the drawing up of coded versions of the contract, which involved pseudonyms, and the retaining of legal counsel. Ultimately, such measures were futile, as the production went well over budget. Wright ended up losing money in this investment. For more on the dispute, see Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest*.

13. “Meeting Richard Wright,” *The Bulletin Board*, June 1950.

14. “Richard Wright Plays Hero in Movie Adaptation of His Novel, *Native Son*,” *New York Times*, June 18, 1951, 19.

15. “‘Native Son’ in Film Form,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 29, 1951.

16. Pierre Chenal to Richard Wright, Classic Pictures v. Department of Education, 29 July 1951, Richard Wright Papers, 112 N.E. 2d (1953), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

17. Ruth Elizabeth Burke, “The Effects of Censorship and Criticism on the Film Adaptations of Richard Wright’s ‘Native Son’” (Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 1993).

18. Barbara Johnson, “The Re(a)d and the Black,” in *Richard Wright’s Native Son*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), 115–24.

19. Quoted in Dawn Sova, *Forbidden Films: Censorship History of 125 Motion Pictures* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2001), 287.

20. Quoted in Sova, *Forbidden Films*, 288. See also Edward De Grazia and Roger K. Newman, *Banned Films: Movies, Censors, and the First Amendment* (New York: Bowker, 1982), and *The Encyclopedia of Censorship*, ed. Jonathan Green (New York: Facts on File, 2005), s.v. "Native Son."

21. Quoted in Alan Gevinson, *American Film Institute Catalogue* (Berkeley and Stanford: University of California Press, 1997), 703.

22. Kansas Board of Review Index, <http://www.kshs.org/research/collections/documents/govtrecords/boardofreviewresults.php?film=native+son&company=&star-&elimination=&begyr=&endvr=&fcssubmit=SEARCH> (accessed January 21, 2010).

23. Dawn Sova, *Forbidden Films*, 217.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Native Son*, screenplay, n.p.

26. Roland Barthes, interview with Richard Wright, n.d., Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

27. Though the international imperative seems to accord with an "international socialism" exemplified in his sympathetic reportage of Ghana's independence movement and especially of the Bandung conference, what is most discernible here is an emphasis on race rather than on class.

28. For illuminating overviews of the history of Argentine cinema, see John King and Nissa Torrents, eds., *The Garden of Forking Paths: Argentine Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1988); Jorge Finkielman, *The Film Industry in Argentina: An Illustrated Cultural History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004); Tamara L. Falicov, *The Cinematic Tango: Contemporary Argentine Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

29. See Tim Bernard, ed., *Argentine Cinema* (Toronto: Nightwood Edition, 1986).

30. Unfortunately, I have only been able to acquire the version of the film approved for U.S. release. Ample documentation, however, exists for the other strikingly different other versions.

31. Review of *Sangre Negra*, *Variety*, April 25, 1951.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. See Marvin Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse: Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996).

36. George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

37. Gino Germano, "Mass Immigration and Modernization in Argentina," in *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, ed. Jorge I. Domínguez (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 37–54.

38. Ariel E. Dulitzky, "A Region in Denial: Racial Discrimination and Racism in Latin America," in *Neither Enemies Nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*, eds. Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 39–59.

39. George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America*, 4.

40. Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper, 1954).

41. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).