A "Savage Mode": The Transmedial Narratology of African American Protest

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Abstract

This article explores narrative in African American protest art by examining Richard Wright's 1940 novel Native Son, alongside 21 Savage (Shayaa Abraham-Joseph) and Metro Boomin's 2016 rap album Savage Mode. I open with a discussion of Native Son as a project of protest and with James Baldwin's criticism of the novel, and of protest fiction at large. Centring Baldwin's critique, this article explores the violence and horror of the narrative worlds of Wright's Bigger Thomas and Abraham-Joseph's 21 Savage, in an effort to discover if these works are capable of complicating Baldwin's claims and expanding notions of what protest is and how it operates.

By applying Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of storyworlds, and the attendant "principle of minimal departure," the article lays out a narratology of protest. The social protest of these works, I find, is rendered uniquely efficacious by the violence that takes place within their storyworlds, violence that operates as a visceral, unignorable force urging real-world change. Because of its impact on the reader or listener, violence and discomfort within these narratives directs that user toward extra-narrative action. In building on the transmedial approach that Ryan encourages, and examining

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Savage Mode as a contemporary work of protest that shares a narrative technique with Native Son, the article also discusses some recent engagements with rap music in traditional scholarship and popular writing.

Throughout, I put forth the argument that both Savage Mode and Native Son function as powerful works of protest against real-world conditions, protests that operate via narratives that empathically involve their users in violent storyworlds. Abraham-Joseph's protest, then, furthers Wright's, as both are works that operate in a "savage" narratological "mode"—one of intense violence and discomfort which, read as protest, has the capacity to prompt an activist response in the user.

"The world, the real one, was civilization secured
and ruled by savage means."
— Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015: 32)

Introduction

Protest has been a central focus of African American literature and art since
before the time when it began to be categorized as such. Writers in the mod-
ernist period, such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, carried on and
refined the struggles against slavery and legalized segregation of their fore-
bears, reacting to the racial violence, hatred, and discrimination they encoun-
tered in their own time. As they did so, these writers outlined an approach
to artistic social critique that became a foundation for African American
art to come. This article, which is founded on a narratological examination
of protest in Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son* (2005b), draws out some key
elements of the narratology of protest by focusing on the various "worlds"
created in African American protest projects. That is, it explores the machin-
ery of protest by focusing on narratives through which protest is conveyed,
especially on the reader's (or "user's") experience of the characters, events,
and sensations that make up those narratives, and the resulting experiential
worlds constructed for an audience.

By using the world-building theory of Marie-Laure Ryan (2014) to
ground the distinction between the real world, in which an artist lives, and the
artistic world they craft in order to critique reality, there is fleshed out below
a widely applicable structure of the form of protest. This structure provides
a framework from which to initiate discussions of realism, violence, and perfor-
mance in Wright's protest work and in that of other protest artists. The article
also uses this framework to work transmedially – a technique encouraged by
Ryan's theory and her drive for wider consciousness of narrative in media – by
investigating world-building as an act of narrative protest in contemporary rap

music, through a parallel examination of artist 21 Savage's 2016 album *Savage Mode*. The project demonstrates, as it explores these narratives, both the mechanics of protest in narrative-based art at large and the continued workings of African American protest in the contemporary moment, showing how current African American art accesses a historically established "mode" of protest that emerges in forms and genres often discounted from scholarly discussions of social critique. Though each of these works possesses its own narrative world, with its own set of characters, conventions, and circumstances, their narratives participate in a shared endeavour to reflect critically on the real world.

Native Son and Wright's protest

"The Negro writer", Wright argued in 1937:

> who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary (1999: 86).

In publishing *Native Son* three years later, Wright sought to do just this, bringing his own "complex consciousness" of the history and circumstances of African American life to bear on the struggles of protagonist Bigger Thomas. These struggles – from the opening scene of the cramped apartment Bigger shares with his mother, brother, sister, and a "huge black rat" (Wright 2005b: 5), through Bigger's employment by Mr. and Mrs. Dalton and his subsequent murder of their daughter Mary, through Bigger's murder of girlfriend Bessie and his flight from and capture by police, all the way to the trial that follows and ends in a sentence of death – mark *Native Son* as a quintessential novel of protest.

As Wright put it in his essay on the origins of the novel's central figure, "the conditions of life under which Negroes are forced to live in America contain the embryonic emotional prefigurations of how a large part of the body politic would react under stress" (2005a: 447). David Britt, reflecting on *Native Son* as a "watershed" moment in African American protest writing nearly thirty years after its publication, frames this protest a bit more specifically (1967). Britt notes that in *Native Son* it is "clear that white prejudice has instilled into Bigger the rational fear which results in the Dalton tragedy" (1967: 4). That is, by displaying the horrific conditions of Bigger's life and bringing their impact on a human subject to a logical conclusion through the character, Wright sought to demonstrate that immense social and political changes were needed.

Baldwin and critical responses

Native Son was and remains controversial because of the brutal lengths to which it goes in demonstrating the monstrosity of what it meant to grow up African American in the first half of the twentieth century. As Kadeshia L. Matthews put it, "Bigger Thomas's answer to the question of how a Negro becomes a man is violence" (2014: 277). James Baldwin, in his famous attack on *Native Son* and the protest novel at large in *Notes of a Native Son*, focused his critique on Bigger's "hatred and his fear", through which "All of Bigger's life is controlled [and] defined" (1984: 22). It is this fear that "drives [Bigger] to murder and his hatred to rape" (Baldwin 1984: 22). Robert James Butler opened a 1986 article on Wright's novel with an overview of critical responses to the brutal violence in *Native Son*, including discussion of several critics who, like Baldwin (1984), have lamented that Wright's use of overt violence is detrimental to the efficacy of *Native Son*'s protest of systemic social injustice. Butler, however, uses a different tactic, mounting a case that in *Native Son* Wright "uses violence extensively but as a necessary and powerful reflector of the deepest recesses of its central character's radically divided nature" (1986: 10). The novel is one of incredible brutality and contains, for example, a detailed description of a young woman's head being sawed from her already-dead body (2005b: 92). In Butler's approach this empowers, rather than hinders, the novel's message of protest.

Baldwin concluded his takedown of the protest novel by claiming that its "failure […] lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (1984: 23). This article responds to Baldwin's criticism by posing two questions; first, can a work that rejects life within its narrative affirm life outside of it? And second, can a work insist on an internal reality without its creator therefore insisting on the solipsistic primacy of that reality? In the following sections, there is outlined a theoretical approach to multiple realities that reveals the narratological machinery of protest, a machinery that operates precisely by rejecting life within a narrative in order to affirm life in reality. Violence in this sense emerges in *Native Son* and *Savage Mode* as Butler describes it: "a necessary and powerful reflector" in a fictional world of the horrors perpetrated on African Americans in the real world (1986: 10). The power of the artistic violence lends power to the protest; through the intensity of brutality in a narrative, the real-life social and political brutality that "inspired" the work is brought to the forefront of the user's experience.

Narrative worlds "across media"

Marie-Laure Ryan, in her work on transmedial world-building theory (2014), outlines a narratological approach to texts across media by parsing these texts in terms of the worlds their narratives create. Ryan's approach is a critically rigorous take on a popular way of talking about art-worlds; Ryan's "worlds" are posited against the concept's "traditional but informal sense", where "»world« stands for various ideas: the social and historical setting typical of the author's works […] the major themes and recurrent images of this work […] and the author's general ideas and philosophy of life […] what we call […] a »worldview«" (2014: 32). In contradistinction to these understandings of "worlds", Ryan uses the term "storyworlds" to refer to worlds that are "something projected by individual texts […] so that every story has its own storyworld" (2014: 32). A storyworld, furthermore, "cannot be called the »world of the author« because […] authors are located in the real world while the storyworld is a fictional world" (Ryan 2014: 32). The concept of storyworlds provides a narratological tool for separating out the world of an author and that of a text, which can in this case help both to explain how narrative functions in protest art, and to draw out the ways in which storyworlds reflect the real worlds of their authors and influences.

Besides the essential theoretical grounding that Ryan's work on world-building provides, it also affords a critical basis for making fruitful connections between the worlds that emerge in various forms of media. Ryan's interest in narratology at large leads her to encourage the comparison of "storyworlds", as the title of her edited volume with Jan-Noël Thon indicates, "across media" (2014). Inviting works and texts from visual and graphic arts, music, films, and more, can only help to enrich understanding of narrative. Inspired by this aim, this project moves to bring the protest found in current rap music into conversation with the protest of Wright's Bigger Thomas.[1] Rather than focusing on the obvious social and political critique that is directly presented as such in the work of artists like Kendrick Lamar, Common, or Talib Kweli, the discussion here draws on the recent work of an artist whose persona does not immediately present its world as one of protest, but who is what might be called a Bigger Thomas of rap. In doing so, the connection is made here between the history of African American protest and the subtle ways in which that legacy continues in contemporary popular media, demonstrating the continued efficacy of Wright's narrative

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[1] The term "rap", rather than "hip-hop", intentionally to avoid accessing the prestige markers often conveyed by references to "hip-hop", as these markers are both superfluous and exclusionary.

approach, the potential for revealing perspectives on the social to be found in forms that are often critically invisible, and the wide-ranging critical utility of a transmedial world-based perspective.

A Savage Mode

In July of 2016, Atlanta rapper 21 Savage (Shayaa Abraham-Joseph) teamed up with producer Metro Boomin (Leland Tyler Wayne, known for his work with artists such as Drake and Future), and together the two released the collaborative album *Savage Mode* (2016). Abraham-Joseph's lyrical work on the album is powerfully violent, pseudo-nihilistic, and brooding, and it is delivered in a gruff, menacing mumble that staggers through Wayne's minimalist production. As Micah Peters put it in an article for *The Ringer*, Abraham-Joseph "hisses about drinking codeine and murdering people over sparse horror movie scores" (2016b). The rapper sounds largely detached from the meanings and the frequently violent implications of what he says, as when, to select one example from many, he matter-of-factly threatens to "wet your mama house, wet your grandma house, / keep shootin' until somebody die", as if this is simply the way things are done (*No Heart*). And it isn't only the threats that come across as cold and dead-eyed in *Savage Mode*. Peters has called attention as well to the moments of supposed pleasure on the album, places where even the most nihilistic rappers typically take a moment to enjoy themselves: "The first non-ad-libbed line you hear on *Savage Mode* is, »I smashed the skripper in the hotel wit' my chains on« [*No Advance*]. On paper, that reads like another rapper boasting about a predilection for using women as disposable playthings" (2016a). However, within the album's aesthetic, "the boast feel[s] labored and joyless; like a coping method for all the messed-up shit he's seen and done" (Peters, 2016a).

Protest and the rejection of life

The miserable physical and psychological conditions that Abraham-Joseph describes throughout *Savage Mode* construct a storyworld within the album that overlaps a great deal with the bleak, vicious storyworld in which Bigger finds himself.[2] While fictional and distinct from the real world lived in by Wright and Abraham-Joseph, these storyworlds do not exist independently

2 Although *Savage Mode* does not relate a single unified story with the traditional narrative progression that *Native Son* does, it still asserts a fractured narrative that the listener expe-

of that world; in fact, the intersections and divergences between these mul-
tiple realities are precisely what make protest art work. Although rap music,
especially that in the trap-rap vein to which Abraham-Joseph's work mostly
belongs, is rarely tied explicitly to protest of real-world conditions, in creat-
ing a fictional world different from but related to the real one – a storyworld
full of the violence, hatred and fear that Baldwin found so distasteful – Abra-
ham-Joseph distills this negativity into a work where it can be analysed and
reflected on, as Wright does through *Native Son*. Where Baldwin contended
that protest art fails because of its rejection of life, it is essential to the pro-
test projects of Wright and Abraham-Joseph that this rejection of life takes
place only within the storyworld and by its protagonist, and need not entail
a rejection of life outside the work. Whether *Native Son*, and protest art in
general, does in fact so completely reject life in the way Baldwin describes is
debatable,[3] but it is argued here that, even if Baldwin's premise is accepted,
by examining the narratology of protest in *Native Son* and *Savage Mode* it
will be found that his conclusion – that rejection of life invalidates protest
art – is incorrect.

In fact, precisely the opposite is true: if Bigger rejects life when he rapes
and murders, and 21 Savage when he kills, robs, and vows to "cut off your
hands" (*No Advance*), each is rejecting life within their storyworld. The po-
tency of this rejection is that it leads to questions of why these characters
would reject life, and in these questions are the aims of protest itself, for this
"why" leads to an examination of the horrors of their storyworlds – horrors
like the viciously racist language used to animalize Bigger by the state prose-
cutor Buckley, who calls him a "black mad dog" – and their origins (Wright
2005b: 409). This leads the user to further questions of what it was that
Wright saw in his own world that led to the terrible state of Bigger's world,
and what Abraham-Joseph experienced that pushed him into his "savage
mode"[4]. Protest in this form operates via affirming life in the real world by
calling attention to aspects of it that require change. This is to say that pro-
test, by unabashedly confronting a user with horrors that require mending,
and thus arguing for change, contends that the real world and the people in
it are worth saving.

riences in disjointed succession.

[3] There is a fleeting, life affirming beauty, for example, in Bigger's contemplation of "the tiny
plane [that] looped and veered, vanishing and appearing, leaving behind it a long trail of
white plumage, like coils of fluffy paste being squeezed from a tube" (Wright 2005b: 16).
That this beauty is marred by the social impossibility for Bigger of pursuing it only adds to
Native Son's critique.

[4] Abraham-Joseph explores precisely this issue in a 2016 interview, and how, following
his own shooting and the accompanying death of a close friend, he "turned into a savage"
(VladTV 2016: 4:57-5:09).

"Minimal departure" and transworld overlap

To measure the distance between the real world in which works are crafted and the various levels of reality in storyworlds, Ryan applies what she calls "the principle of minimal departure" (2014: 35). Storyworlds are "an imaginative experience. In the case of fiction, this experience is a blend of objective knowledge and make-believe; the user […] pretends to believe that [a storyworld] exists autonomously or, in other words, that it is real" (Ryan 2014: 34-35). The principle of minimal departure provides a way to gauge the extent to which the user, in this case the reader or listener, can fill out and understand the details of a storyworld by extrapolating from and applying knowledge they have of the real world, and to what extent the user must learn new details and attempt to fill in gaps of comprehension by extrapolating from information provided within the storyworld. This principle operates in such a way that "when a text mentions an object that exists in reality, all the real-world properties of this object can be imported into the storyworld unless explicitly contradicted by the text" (Ryan 2014: 35). What this allows for is not the needless ranking of the realities of texts and worlds, but the grasping of their spatial separation and overlap, which is especially appropriate to discussion of Wright's realism and of artistic works that comment on the real-world situations of their creators.

In the case of *Native Son* and protest art, the central narratological utility of the principle of minimal departure is to help in parsing out to what extent and in what way the "objects" of social conditions can be directly imported from the real world into that of the narrative, and thus to describe the degree of overlap between the two. There is, in virtually every kind of text, an element of the storyworld and of unreality, even in biographies and depictions of real-world events. "Nonfictional stories", Ryan clarifies, "are told as true of the real world, but they do not necessarily live up to this ideal" (2014: 33). Because of this, it is "necessary to distinguish the world as it is presented and shaped by a story from the world as it exists autonomously" (Ryan 2014: 33). In the case of realist fiction like *Native Son*, it is obvious that the novel constructs a storyworld, that is, that the characters and events are fictional. Even though Wright's text, as realist fiction, is crafted to allow for a high degree of importability of real-world information and objects, be they places, political/social circumstances, or literal physical objects, there are aspects of unreality that Wright himself acknowledges. In *How "Bigger" Was Born*, Wright notes for example this scene:

> Bigger stands in a cell with a Negro preacher, Jan, Max, the State's Attorney, Mr. Dalton, Mrs. Dalton, Bigger's mother, his brother, his sister, Al, Gus, and Jack […] I knew that it was unlikely that so many people would ever be allowed to come into a murderer's cell (2005a: 458).

It is, of course, also unlikely that this large group would all fit simultaneously in Bigger's jail cell. In terms of the principle of minimal departure however, such a scene does little to detract from the novel's realism; while some of the details of this scene seem unusual, they are not so far removed from reality that they cannot still be easily imagined.[5]

Spencer Hawkins, in a superficially dissonant study published in 2016 that explores overlap between the worlds of musical works and that of their listeners, arrives at a description of this overlap that is strongly aligned with Ryan's principle, although he does not use her terms. Hawkins' work compares the rhetorical performance of rapper Snoop Dogg (Cordozar Calvin Broadus, Jr.) with that of ancient Greek sophists (2016). In what is largely a study of how rap music functions as persuasion, Hawkins also gestures to the way that rap creates worlds, and the protest that can derive from them, although he is cautious about attributing the latter to Broadus: "I charitably read his bravura as an act of defiance against institutionalized racism" (2016: 134). In terms of worlds, Hawkins claims that "Gangsta rap builds what Josh Kun calls an »audiotopia«, a musical fantasy space populated only by the likeminded" (2016: 132). With reference to Ryan, it is argued here that like-mindedness is essentially another phrasing of the principle of minimal departure; that is, how "alike" are the user's real-world and the "fantasy space" created in the artistic world? If they are largely unlike, this does not mean that the musical space (world) is permanently inaccessible to the user; it will simply require a greater imaginative leap for the user to access that world.

The narratology of imported experience

Where *Native Son*'s storyworld creates social critique, in scenes where its reflection of Wright's world constitutes specific protest, the principle of minimal departure is a tool for gauging and discussing the impact of that protest. In the scene with the rat that opens the novel, the reader is accosted immediately by the ringing of the alarm clock, which signals the reader's own awakening

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[5] There should be added here the caveat that realism, and a close relationship between the real world and a storyworld, are not the only ways to create protest. In his 1952 novel *Invisible Man* (1995), for example, Ralph Ellison crafted protest fiction using precisely the opposite technique by pointing out the absurdity of social conditions.

in Bigger's world. Gradually, distress builds as the details of the Thomas family's living conditions are disclosed. The "dark and silent room" echoes a "surly grunt"; the reader explores the uncomfortably crammed area of the "narrow space between two iron beds"; the reader discovers the lack of partition or additional rooms as the boys must turn away to allow their mother and sister privacy in dressing (Wright 2005b: 3). All of this comes in the novel's opening page, and the overall sensation created – even before the reader is assaulted, like Bigger and his family, by the gigantic rat – is one of claustrophobic discomfort and jarring emotional unease. "The narrowness of the Thomases' room reflects the narrowness of their lives", Matthews reflects (2014: 281), and Wright's protestation of the restriction of both is reflected in the empathetic discomfort experienced by the reader.

There is little in this opening scene that cannot be easily and instantaneously imported from the reader's own experience.[6] The objects that are encountered in this scene the reader has likely come across in their own daily life, and the cramped conditions can be extrapolated by the reader from uncomfortable spaces they have found themselves in previously. In other scenes, the reader may or may not have had experiences that correspond to those experienced by Bigger. When Bigger first visits the Dalton's to interview for a position as their driver, he wonders upon his arrival, "Would they expect him to come in the front way or back?" (Wright 2005b: 44). He worries, "Suppose a police saw him wandering in a white neighborhood like this? It would be thought that he was trying to rob or rape somebody. He grew angry" (Wright 2005b: 44). In this case the reader may or may not have experienced Bigger's line of thought. Even if the reader has not, Bigger's emotions and worries in the scene do not constitute an un-importable departure from the worries, uncertainties and frustration that anyone experiences when confronted by new situations, or when one finds themselves to be somewhere where they are not wanted.

It is important to clarify here that none of this discussion is to trivialize the racial terror Bigger experiences in a white neighborhood, knowing that he could easily be arrested, harassed, or attacked for simply being black. Nor is it intended to generalize or universalize what Bigger feels here, to say that because everyone has at one time or another been uncomfortable or angry that everyone has therefore been subjected to the sort of humiliation that Bigger experiences, that the reader "knows his pain". This is clearly not the case, and this discussion hopefully avoids falling into the trap David Britt describes when he argues that "[b]y discussing Bigger Thomas in human/universal terms rather

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[6] This statement (and the principle of minimal departure in general) is of course subjective. If one was to imagine a hypothetical reader at the time of publication, however, perhaps a middle-class recipient of *Native Son* as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, that may help provide a baseline for the subjective importation of the reader's experience in this case.

than as a social phenomenon one does violence both to the text of *Native Son* and to the terms as parts of a meaningful critical vocabulary" (1967: 5). Instead, what this conceptualization of departure and overlap draws out is how protest functions in narrative; by extrapolating from lived experiences in order to make an attempt at understanding those undergone by Bigger, the reader is forced to regurgitate instances of his or her own discomfort, whatever those may be.

Parsing the worlds of rap music

The question of overlap between real world and art world is one that also frequently arises in critical commentary on rap music. Particularly because real-world violence is often directly cited by artists as motivation for their music and referred to explicitly within rap narratives, moves to relate real-life trauma experienced by a rapper to the violence which emerges in their work are common. Israel Daramola's review of *Savage Mode* for *Pitchfork*, for example, opens with a catalogue of tragic events in Abraham-Joseph's life, events which serve as "an explanation for so much of the bleakness of the music and the performative apathy in how he treats violence; he's been consumed by it in the most formative years of his life" (2016). For Daramola – and, to a lesser extent, for Peters – the rapper's biography justifies the musical content, and the latter is in many ways a retelling of the trauma in the former. Contrary to these biographical approaches, which at least attempt to address the underpinnings of contemporary art that may not universally present itself as worthy of critical inquiry, are approaches to rap music like Toby S. Jenkins' (2011). Jenkins looks to confer value on "hip-hop" artists as thinkers and intellectuals by pointing to lyrics by Jay-Z, Mos Def and others, lyrics that reveal a thoughtfulness and depth that Jenkins feels, is not properly accorded to rappers. Jenkins' defence of rappers' intelligence and genius is enthusiastic and, in general, commendable, but it is in the end short-sighted. His focus on the need for lyricism as evidence of intelligence and thoughtfulness, and on the necessity that rappers move "beyond glorifying one-dimensional and often fake identities in their music and lyrics" – the purview of the "thug" – means that his criticism actually participates in the stereotyping that he is fighting against by privileging artists within the form that provide easy evidence of their "intelligence", while those that do not are relegated to thuggery, and their music is discarded as "harmful art" (Jenkins 2011: 1248).[7]

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[7] Also at issue here is that Jenkins' criticism of gangster rap rests in large part, as popular-media attacks on rap music often do, on the oversimplification that people simply seek to repli-

Though Abraham-Joseph was still years away from notoriety in the United States when Jenkins' article was published, it can be said with a good deal of confidence that his music would probably be lumped into Jenkins' category of "harmful art", and it does not appear likely that any amount of insistence on *Savage Mode*'s biographical accuracy would help to make a case otherwise.[8] To escape such dualistic reduction necessitates the incorporation of Ryan's principle of minimal departure. Art need not – and, as Ryan's principle demonstrates, likely cannot – exactly correspond to the real life of its creators, or describe real-world events with such precision as to render the two worlds identical. Ryan's narratology therefore preserves the critic or listener from being forced to make distinctions of whether a piece of rap music "authentically" reflects reality – see Jenkins' "one-dimensional […] fake identities" (2011: 1248) – and makes obvious, direct commentary upon it, or fails to do so and therefore must be cast aside. In encountering the degrees of distance or similarity that can be parsed out through the principle of minimal departure, the user experiences different degrees of narrativity via different approaches to art, protest, and representation in general within various storyworlds.

From this perspective, it becomes apparent that whether Abraham-Joseph's persona of 21 Savage is, in fact, "fake" or not, is not the question. What is, is whether the conditions of the narrative world of *Savage Mode*, and its connection to the real-world in which it was conceived, can be used to extrapolate a push for social change. Protest art, as has been argued throughout this article, need not declare itself as protest, it need only display conditions of an unlivable narrative world in such a way that it causes the user to reflect on their own world and be moved to see this unlivable quality in it, and prompt them to push for change. As in *Native Son*, the experience of bleak horror[9] that permeates the world Abraham-Joseph has created in *Savage Mode* leads the listener to question why such a world was shaped. Through the principle of minimal departure, it can be seen, not how closely the world of 21 Savage represents the world of Abraham-Joseph, but how closely it represents the world of each individual listener. By then extrapolating themselves into the nightmarish situations of *Native Son* and *Savage Mode*, readers draw lines between their own experiences,

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cate behaviour they see in art and in others, and that art that does not therefore demonstrate "good values" is essentially harmful.

[8] There is perhaps a case to be made based in trauma theory – one which Daramola and Peters lightly gesture to – that violent rap music allows insight into the process of recovering from and dealing with trauma that alone makes it worthy of further critical examination.

[9] Peters goes so far as to classify *Savage Mode* as a work of "trap horrorcore", along the lines of Three 6 Mafia's early records (2016a).

those of Bigger Thomas, and those of 21 Savage, a Bigger Thomas of our contemporary moment. Instead of rashly relegating art like *Savage Mode* to the supposedly critically-irrelevant realm of ignorant thuggery, the user should instead engage with this work and inquire why such art arises, and ask if there is something they can learn from it about their social and political obligations.

In recent scholarship, the reductionist rejection of non-"lyrical" or "unintelligent" rap music has thankfully begun to fall away as scholars have embraced the nuance and potential of worlds that operate outside of traditional scholarly forms. Mukasa Mubirumusoke, for example, has lately brought the work of rapper Nas (Nasir bin Olu Dara Jones) together with Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy on the variability of truth in a way that brings out the protest performance of an art form where being "honest" sometimes means being dishonest:

> a rapper such as NaS […] often raps honestly in this Nietzschean sense about his experiences in an anti-black world, that is, rapping "frankly" about the conditions of life as a black person, even when the entire content of the lyrics […] may be untruthful or lies (2016: 177).

In terms of protest, such an approach "provides a critical, extramoral edge for interpreting and understanding the life-denying and morally depraved circumstances of black life" (2016: 177). Though the intention here has been to go further than Mubirumusoke, who in his discussion of Jones still lights upon an artist who often does present his art as explicit social critique, Mubirumusoke's approach applies to *Savage Mode* as well. The world Abraham-Joseph crafts for his 21 Savage personae to inhabit is most certainly "morally depraved" (2016: 177), and as such it provides a narrative window for engaging with real-world moral depravity. Mubirumusoke points especially to the necessary separation of art from life, as described by Ryan's principle of minimal departure, and it is this separation which makes rap music effective protest, rather than the opposite: "Black rappers should not be tried as criminals because of their lyrics but, instead, seen from [an] outlaw perspective, which forces the listener to rethink the sociological status quo of the pathologically criminal and undesirable black American" (2016: 191). The listener who enters the rapper's narrative world, like the reader who is thrown into Bigger's, undergoes a transformation of perspective that makes it much more difficult to simply pathologize these individuals.

Protest and empathy

The understanding of protest used throughout this article is based in affect and empathy; the user feels what they know of Bigger's and 21 Savage's experiences by importing relevant experiences of their own into their comprehension of the narrative, and these experiences become tied to the protagonist's as the reader explores the narrative world. The mechanics of empathy in transmedial narratology have been explored by scholars like Marco Caracciolo (2014), whose "empathetic perspective" on works such as William S. Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch* and the 2003 video game *Max Payne 2* examines how, in visceral narratives of this kind, "characters' experiences can be represented only because stories tap into the experiential reservoir shared by the recipients" (2014: 231). *Native Son* and *Savage Mode* in this manner multiply the feelings of discomfort and terror that users have imported into the storyworld from their daily lives in a way that confines, attacks, and contorts the user unflinchingly and repeatedly. In both works, the user experiences the sheer unlivable horror of constant captivity, constant distress, and constant hatred and fear as they empathically interpolate these sensations with the protagonists. It is this experience that makes Wright's and Abraham-Joseph's protest effective; they make the reader feel that such conditions cannot be withstood and must be changed. As Caracciolo puts it, "in temporarily adopting the characters' perspectives, we afford them a chance for interacting with – and leaving a mark on – our broader outlook on the world" (2014: 236). The user turns then, it is hoped, from their experience of these storyworlds to the real world, where they have the capacity to make changes.

Closing: revisiting Baldwin

Before concluding, it is necessary to briefly address the second part of Baldwin's critique of the protest novel, and the second question posed above regarding it – that protest fiction fails "in its insistence that it is [the human being's] categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (1984: 23), and whether the insistence on a particular perspective within a work does in fact necessitate the privileging of this perspective outside of it. By applying the preceding formulation of the various levels of reality that operate across different worlds and collaborate to shape the experience of a work, and the principle of minimal departure, it is now possible to counter Baldwin's claim of the solipsism of Bigger's reality. In *How "Bigger" Was Born*, Wright actually doubles down on Baldwin's criticism, but he does so as an argument for the strength of *Native Son*'s protest:

Wherever possible, I told of Bigger's life in close-up, slow-motion […]. I had long had the feeling that this was the best way to "enclose" the reader's mind in a new world, to blot out all reality except that which I was giving him (2005a: 459).

Wright here is describing precisely that elision of narrative distance that has been repeatedly pointed to in the above discussion; as readers experience *Native Son*, they "feel that there was nothing between [them] and Bigger" (2005a: 459). Baldwin's critique becomes instead an astute appraisal of Wright's technique (and Abraham-Joseph's); of course it is Bigger's "categorization alone which is real" (Baldwin 1984: 23), as this is by design the only categorization afforded by Wright within the storyworld. Inside that world this perspective cannot, and should not, be transcended, or the oppressive conditions that drive the reader to act on the work's protest will fall away. Where Bigger's "categorization" can be transcended is outside of the reality of his storyworld, in the real world, but understanding the need for this move arises only through violent, direct, and prolonged experience with Bigger's life.

Conclusion

It has hopefully been demonstrated in the preceding discussion of *Native Son* and *Savage Mode* that there can be positivity in negativity, and affirmation of life in its rejection. To so powerfully say "no" to life, as do Bigger Thomas and 21 Savage within their storyworlds, should lead the user to say "yes" to improving life outside of those worlds. The user should embrace this violence and horror as visceral rejections of the conditions of their own existence, as symptoms, and then – recognizing that the deplorable conditions of these storyworlds are not purely narrative fantasies but distillations of real-life conditions – seek these symptoms out at their sources. The race-based confinement, hatred, and fear that permeate *Native Son* continue in the claustrophobia and inhumanity of *Savage Mode*, and both works operate in the narrative "mode" of the latter. As Ta-Nehisi Coates states in the epigraph that opens this essay, "The world, the real one, was civilization secured and ruled by savage means" (2015: 32). The cruel storyworlds of Bigger and 21 Savage force the user to turn from these worlds to "the real one", to look at how civilization has been "secured", and, hopefully, to pursue a course of action that can begin to free it from those bonds.

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